

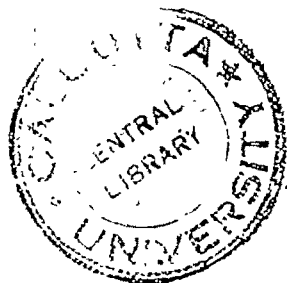
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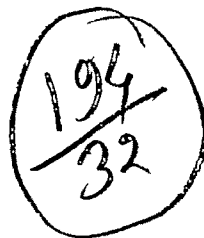
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SPECIAL ISSUE : NEW LITERATURES IN ENGLISH



UNIVERSITY OF CALCUTTA

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Editor-in-Chief

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PREFACE

The theme of this issue is NEW LITERATURES IN ENGLISH. The word *new* however is no longer an innocuous monosyllabic signifier. In the context of postcolonial theoretical approaches and the avalanche of postcolonial writing in English pouring out of the erstwhile *silent* colonies, the contribution of the emerging literatures from Africa, Australia, Canada, Pakistan, India among many others creates an overwhelming sense of triumph and self-assurance as the Empire writes back in all font sizes and formats, with power and confidence. Many postcolonial critics and theorists have expressed their reservations about the limiting and blurred contours of a nomenclature such as 'new literatures in English'. Others however argue that choice of such a name helps to de-emphasize the colonial past and so may be preferable to some other more defining names that privilege the colonial connection such as "Commonwealth literature", "post-colonial literature" and even "third world literature". We agreed that new literatures in english seemed to be a descriptive statement of purpose and promise, as such writing is increasingly gaining a political identity that engages both fictional writing and the English language in which it is written.

Resistance and reconciliation are inter-twined in a celebration of hybridism, syncretism negotiation and transculturation in new literatures in English which is also a caveat for all nay Sayers as it unfurls the flag of a multi-polar world of equal players on a level playing field. The voices of the marginalized and the minorities are now heard as subjects and agents in their own home ground, and the binaries of domination and subordination have been destabilized and re-defined. These voices now resonate beyond the known problematics of appropriation and abrogation, creating signs and myths that define a pluralistic world order. The language of such new literatures is English, but it is not the grand imperial language of yester years, English is now the lingua franca of the globalized environment, the language that makes outsourcing and in sourcing of information and ideas fast moving and production driven, though simultaneously ensuring that local and national identities are not

lost in the enthusiasm for the global It is this triumph of sameness and difference, activating both, engaging both in a positive dialogue that represents in literary writing heterogeneous cultures, histories, myths, societies, ideas and ideologies.

Though our departmental journal has showcased critical articles on topics as diverse as Shakespeare and Utpal Dutt, in view of the recently concluded international conferences on Imperial Constructions and Indigenous Self-Fashioning followed by Globalization and postcolonial writing: An Australia India exchange among others, we thought this issue prioritizing new literatures in English would be very appropriate and timely as it will undoubtedly be a boon not only to our own researchers and students but will be welcomed by interested members of other universities teaching and researching in this very significant growing field of postcolonial writing.

We are not only grateful to all our local and global contributors of eminence for their timely response to our call for submissions, we are overwhelmed by the pains many of them took in order to secure reprint permissions from their publishers for re-publication of their articles in our journal. We hope the journal will be useful for all members of the teaching faculty of local and global universities who are interested in new literatures in English and englishes. We earnestly welcome feedback about this issue and own responsibility regarding all publication lapses that may have inadvertently lingered despite our best efforts to avoid the same.

Sanjukta Dasgupta & Jharna Sanyal.

Co-editors

February 22, 2006

African Diaspora and the World of Books

Concluding the Indaba

Alastair Niven

Every year, preceding the Zimbabwe International Book Fair, a conference takes place in Harare. This is called The Indaba. The topic is always something to do with books. In 2004 I was invited, for the third time, to be the General Rapporteur. The theme was the African diaspora. I thought long and hard about the morality of attending an event being conducted in a country enduring the dismal consequences of despotism. In the end I accepted the invitation, having consulted Zimbabwean opinion in quarters I respected. The Book Fair is a beacon of reasonableness and intellectual effort in a darkened, almost surrealistically nightmarish society.

On previous occasions I have done the job because Terence Ranger was not there to do it, he being the doyen of historians of Zimbabwe, a hugely respected visiting presence in a country containing some of the most ancient archaeological sights on the African continent. Professor Ranger had provided the concluding comments on many previous occasions, I only twice before.

There follows a transcript of my remarks, closing the 2004 Indaba.

"I am grateful for the support and generosity of the Trustees of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in inviting me to be here at its Annual Indaba. Our Chairman for this closing session is Professor Terence Ranger, who has been Summer-up in Chief many times. I am the Rapporteur General, so he who is chairing the occasion must be Chairman Field Marshall at least, if not Commander in Chief. I feel like Tony Blair in the company of George Bush, gooeey-eyed and very much the junior partner!

This has been a very well attended Indaba, in a time of economic and political difficulty for Zimbabwe, mirroring the unexpectedly high take-up by publishers at the Book Fair itself.

What a great theme you have chosen for this year's Indaba. We have looked before at the state of African Studies, at the Protection and Retrieval of Traditional Knowledge, at Copyright and

Marketing, but never I think in the context of the diaspora – or diaspora. Last Thursday I was with my 90-year-old aunt in London and I told her that I was coming out to Zimbabwe the next day. 'Be careful', she said, imagining I think that Mr Mugabe might personally rough me up in the hotel lobby. 'What's the conference about she asked?' 'The African Diaspora', I replied, to which she said 'I didn't think you knew anything about horticulture'. I think she was thinking of an old British song, 'The Biggest Aspidistra in the World', only somehow in her mind it was 'The Biggest Diaspora in the World'.

But it probably is. People of African descent are in every continent, including, many anthropologists now believe, Australia, where aboriginal links with Africa may go back to the time millennia ago when Australia was attached to a much greater land mass. This is the first African conference I have attended at which mention was made of DNA research as a way of linking up diasporic peoples, whether they were separated by the movement of tectonic plates or by the economic imperatives of slavery. In the week in which Francis Crick, the British scientist who discovered the double helix formation of DNA, has died, it has been appropriate to be discussing the major implications of what he did. And of course a demand for the voice of science to be heard has been another feature of this Indaba. I hope that before long – why not next year? – that the Indaba will take as its actual theme 'Science and Africa'. We hear at every Indaba about the potency of indigenous culture, but is it not time that we heard more about traditional medicine, about new advances in genetic research as it affects matters as diverse as crop production and ancestry investigation, about the mismatch of university science teaching and the availability of appropriate books and journals, and about Africa's own very real contribution to contemporary scientific enquiry and debate? HIV/AIDS increasingly touches deliberations on almost any topic concerning Zimbabwe or Africa, and you in this country have a major contribution to make to these, sadly resulting from your losses. Could there be a better way of explaining to the world that Africa is not just about problems and not *only* indebted to its past, but an active player in the modern world, with its own contribution to the advance of knowledge? A few years ago we examined at the Indaba issues around new information technology. Let's expand on that. Xavier Carelse summed it up for us: 'Africa is regarded as rich in culture and poor in everything

else. It denigrates its own herbal medicine and places no value on physical research.' In other words, Africa must change this mind-set if it is to be credible in international scholarly and scientific circles.

In making the focus of this conference the African diaspora a different kind of statement is being made for the listening world. Africa reaches across the globe. As Rukudzo Murapa put it at the start of this event, 'One thing which unites us is that we are all one big African family', and he invoked the Creation Myths to emphasise our common humanity. The Book Fair's theme this year is akin to the Indaba's, 'Dialogue Across Nations'. It has been a special pleasure for all of us to welcome our brothers and sisters from across the waters. Black America and the Caribbean diaspora have been well represented and have made wonderful contributions. Indeed, a secondary theme of this conference has been to honour many of the great diasporic figures from the past; W.E.B. DuBois, Sinclair Drake, Francis Deng, Claude Ake, Joseph Harris, Walter Rodney, Marcus Garvey, J.A. Rogers, Edward Kamau Brathwaite. How good to hear these names honoured in the continent of their hearts.

One of the highlights of the Indaba was at the moment of its formal opening last night, when Senator Delano Roosevelt Franklyn gave the best kind of panoramic address, allusive, passionate, enlightened and profound. Of course, his name fascinated us all and he explained (as though no-one had ever asked it before) how it came about that he was antithetically named after a great American President. I'm not sure I look forward to hearing a future Indaba addressed by Bush George, but you never know. It reminds me of when I ran the Africa Centre in London twenty years ago. There was a delightful man who used to visit the Centre who was a nephew of the long serving President Tubman of Liberia. My friend had been born in the Second World War and his parents had kept their options open by christening him Winston Adolf Tubman.

In her acknowledgement of the diasporic links between Africa and Trinidad Carole Boyce Davies, one of the best speakers of the past few days, reminded us of how Zimbabwe's name has resonated symbolically for the black community and indeed for freedom lovers everywhere. The struggle here, as in South Africa, echoes black aspirations across the globe. Professor Boyce Davies specifically linked active struggles for liberation with the building up of knowledge. You cannot have the one without the other. Knowledge

recognises no constraints, so until peoples are free they cannot have full access to self-awareness or to knowledge of others. She examined, albeit with a warning note of scepticism, what Henry Louis Gates and others had set up. It involved writers such as Paul Gilroy and John Henry Clark, who provided crucial staging points in the freeing of knowledge so that it can be shared universally. If I understood her right, she felt that the demise of the activist student, no longer faced by such sharp political struggles as in the past, and the rise of an entrepreneurial culture in modern universities bring with them dangers to which we must all be alert. She saw the possibility of a recolonisation of the black mind, with scholars ignoring the message carried in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*. It may be dangerous, for example, for scholars continuously to revisit European colonisation but to ignore the rise of a new American imperialism.

I would have wanted at this Indaba the North American and Caribbean diasporic voice to be matched by contributions from black Britain (one of our leading novelists, Diran Adebayo, was in the audience but was not given a platform to speak), from France, Canada and Brazil. Indeed, it is only three years since we had Francophone Africa as our theme at this Indaba, and we all pledged to ensure that the Francophone presence would always be evident here. Where is it? Where in our debates are our colleagues from Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau? I realise that the organisers can't do everything, but these voices are missed. The Indaba must not be just an Anglophone event.

In his excellent opening address Allen Isaacman spoke about 'legacies of engagement: African scholarship informed by enlightenment'. He reminded us of the solid achievements of pioneering scholars, to whom he paid tribute, explaining how they rejected colonial self-justification as a 'civilising mission', and recognised the exploitative nature of this mission; how these scholars were truly global in their outlook, and ahead of their time in the totality of their Africanism. Professor Isaacman set out the parameters of most of the discussions which followed. He reminded us, for example, that scholarship is not just about documents and archaeological remains; it involves life histories. Others took up this theme over and over again. Halrushu Goka, our Africologist friend from South Africa: 'Scholarship does not just mean university

and research foundations'. Carole Boyce Davies again: 'The academy is a colonial concept'. Taban Lo Liyong: 'The context in which African subjects began is not a good one ... Shouldn't a university here be dedicated to the whole of the African experience and not just to the African Studies part of it?' I don't think these are antediluvian voices calling for the dismantling of universities or modern ways of conducting scholarly research, so much as reminders that these alone do not provide the whole story. The lived experience of ordinary people in non-intellectual contexts has a powerful contribution to make to an understanding of knowledge, and we marginalise it, or worse patronise it, at our peril. As another friend from America, Naana Banyiwa Home, put it, 'We need to go beyond the universities'.

One might expect that Walter Kamba, first black Vice-Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe, would epitomise a traditional view of scholarship, but he did anything but. True, he took as his starting point an assumption that universities are a force for good, disseminating knowledge for its own sake and acting universally as agents of change. But he chastised the Eurocentrism of many African universities. Today this is, of course, far less true than it once was, with the study of African literature, music, society and religions at the heart of many curricula, but Professor Kamba asserted that it was still the case that African customary law is often neglected in legal studies. It was from Professor Kamba that we heard again a point which Professor Isaacman had made, and which reverberated throughout the Indaba, not entirely without controversy: the point being that African anthropology was a European invention crafted to make of Africa a concept convenient to the colonial enterprise. On the other hand, it was salutary to hear our Chairman, Terence Ranger, remind us of the dangers of polarisation. As Professor Kamba put it, 'I worry about the dichotomisation of African research, the implication that only Africans can effectively research Africa'.

Another of the major themes of the Indaba has been the contribution of women to African studies and publishing. We must all have been moved by this. Though there were the usual jokes at the expense of the men in the room, I don't think any of us males felt intellectually castrated by this rise of the feminocracy. The inauguration of the Women's Section of the Indaba by the admirable Mrs Sarah Kachingwe is long overdue. It was good to hear the

name of the great Ashanti leader Yaa Asantewa evoked more than once. But I don't suppose I was the only man in the room who had a sneaking satisfaction at a hint of counter-revolution when the chairlady passed a note to Professor Kamba indicating that his allotted time was up. 'I am not going to be intimidated by you, Madame Chairman, or by anyone'. Women played as full a part as men on the floor of this Indaba and made some outstanding contributions, not always talking bleakly of struggle and disempowerment but proving their relevance by the sharpness of their questioning from the positions they hold. Hilda Matarira, one of the new generation of African women Vice Chancellors, in a crucial intervention from the floor returned us to the practicalities of research. 'We must mobilise resources', she said. 'It is divisive and unprogressive to continue arguments about the West versus Africa'. This was a prelude to what I found one of the key contributions of the Indaba, from Paul Zeleza, the Malawian historian based in the United States. He reminded us that African Studies are approached in different ways in different parts of the world. He appeared quite critical of the conflicts which beset the field in America particularly, objecting to the use of Africa as a kind of testing ground for ideological disputes between Afro Americans, white Americans and African *arrivistes*. He brought out very clearly the way in which new concepts of globalisation were challenging traditional academic Area Studies programmes, and wondered if the fact that many of the political pioneers of modern Africa – Kwame Nkrumah, for example – were trained abroad in black colleges had not brought a diasporic mode of thought to Africa's political development which could be rediscovered today. Is the next generation of African politicians as steeped in diasporic experience as the founders of modern Africa often were? Will President Mugabe's successor, assuming that there ever is one, have much feel for the black diaspora? Professor Zeleza appealed for incentives that engage head-on with diasporic issues.

We have been fortunate at this conference to have visitors from so many other countries, all with their own perspective on African studies and publication. The first we heard from was the Czech ambassador, an old friend of the Indaba, explaining how a country as little involved in colonisation as Czechoslovakia (now the separate states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia) would nevertheless be pioneering in its interest in Africa, producing the first comprehensive

literary history of Africa back in the mid 1960s. I can recall how useful in my own research at that time I found the writings of Vladimir Klima. Another great friend of the Indaba, and indeed a sponsor through Kopinor, whose Executive Board he chairs, is Helge Rønning from Norway. He made a point, reiterated by many, that African studies should not be decontextualised. Africa should be in every course in every discipline taught on the African continent.

Flora Veit-Wild from Germany, building on a long association with this country, reminded us of the important work of German fathers of African folk tales (Wilhelm Blick, for example) and later of the powerful intellectual contributions made to the study of African culture by Janheinz Jahn and Ulli Beier. She quoted Dambudzo Marechera's memorable aphorism, 'I do not consider influences pernicious'. I was glad she did so, because Marechera, Zimbabwe's extraordinary meteorite and essayist, is always in my mind's eye at every Indaba I attend. I recall him in his years in Britain always carrying two books. One would be the tattered manuscript of his latest work, to emerge in print a year or so later, and the other would either be the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound or George Orwell's *Down and Out in London and Paris*. Dambudzo bestrode cultures, utterly African and wholly of the world of literature, wherever it emanated. He may have had a wayward self-destructive personality but his spirit was very much that which prevails today at this Indaba. The chairperson of Flora's session was a Professor of African Literature from the U.S. and I hope she buys one of Marechera's books before she goes home to familiarise herself with him.

We have had other contributions from abroad: John-Willy Rudolph and Christian Upsahl for example from Norway, heralding an excellent session on the rights of African authors, scholars and publishers. Allison Demas from Jamaica posed the interesting conundrum 'Who owns the copyright on the Anansi stories?' These of course are tales about the trickster spider Anansi, which were taken across the Atlantic by the slaves and became rooted not just in Jamaica but throughout the black diaspora, just as Yoruba myths are heard today in Brazil.

At this Indaba we have touched upon one of the profoundest and most complex ownership debates that faces the modern world. To whom belongs traditional knowledge? To whom indeed, belongs the environment? It has repeatedly been argued that Africans need

to claim their rights. Some spectacular examples of successful assertions of ownership were brought to our attention: the victory over Disney, for example, when photographs were taken without permission of native structures and bushland in South America. We might have heard of the Aboriginal repossession of Uluru, Ayer's Rock, in Australia, or of Maori sovereignty over ancestral sites in New Zealand. These claims pose huge issues and in the end are manna for the lawyers, but we will never have a balanced world if adjustments are not made and historic injustices not reversed. Our concerns here are mirrored by the debates in the museum world about the ownership of cultural artefacts. The arguments were superbly pulled together by Emmanuel Sackey, who reminded us of the possible paradox that, unlike similar cases in India or China, the debates and documentation are always conducted in English, not in an indigenous African language. There have been many calls at the Indaba for Protection of Traditional Knowledge, with the assertion that free trade can become a cover for the weakening of local cultures: Ghanaian *Kente* used for handbags, for example. Protection provides more scope for the lawyers, of course, and I personally wonder how realistic it is to protect Traditional Knowledge absolutely, but if there are enough people wanting this highbrow condom it may be possible.

What a wide-ranging Indaba it has been. We have heard from Nicea Gumbo and others about the dangers to us all of pirated publications, with their absence of standards and ethics; about the 'copyleft' movement, resistant to international copyright understandings; about the difficulty of getting compensation for massive photocopying among students, but the income it provides if successful. We have heard about the ludicrous fine, Z\$400, 'less than the price of an egg', imposed on people in Zimbabwe who infringe copyright. Startling statistics have leapt out of various presentations: the fact, for example, that Africa consumes 12% of the world's publications, but produces only 2%.

From the breakout groups with which the Indaba concluded we have heard much evidence of strong meaty discussion and a determination to face up to the problems which face writers, publishers and researchers throughout the continent and beyond. For me the diaspora theme has brought home the urgent need for renewing existing linkages and creating new ones. I heard this morning, for example, that the 47 universities of Nigeria never get

together to do a co-publishing deal. Why ever not? Think of how overheads could be reduced and distribution vitalised if there was such a coming together. WIPA, ARIPO, APNET, and all the other organisations represented at the Indaba, have major challenges, but how good to know that they are being met with determination by such impressive and articulate advocates. If nothing else, the Indaba reminds us of the quality of such institutional leadership in Africa today. It's truly exciting. It has also constantly reiterated the significance of the written and oral literatures of this continent. I think we all agree that it has been great to have poems intersecting sessions. We need more of that. Actual creative writers have, alas, been underused at this Indaba. We had Atukwei Okai in our midst, the most brilliant performer, but his voice has hardly been heard.

The recent well-aided project to list Africa's 100 Best Books grew out of ZIBF. The majority of the books selected, in a list that encompassed scholarship and documentation as well as the creative imagination, were literary. Literature gives rise to every kind of issue. In his writings, for example, Chinua Achebe tells us what it was like to be at the threshold of liberation. Literary debate allows us to explore aesthetic issues, such as whether you can have value-free fiction and research. In all this we are constantly reminded of the importance of translation.

The challenges of this Indaba are similar elsewhere, as the diaspora theme has underlined. In a contribution unjustly tucked away in a foreshortened special interest group this morning a gentleman who had come even further than our Jamaican contingent, Madhat Lal Maharjun from Katmandu, Nepal, described publishing and research conditions in his own country. It may be odd for me to end this summing up by looking out of Africa towards the peaks of the Himalayas, but I do so consciously. We are, as this Book Fair reminds us, in a dialogue across nations. By looking into the research and publishing needs of Africa, by looking into ourselves, we discover our shared values around the globe. As Tendai Makura said, mid-way in the Indaba, 'African Studies changed my life, led me to understand myself and thus to discover the rest of Africa'. I hope that this Indaba has done the same. Thank you."

Harare, Zimbabwe, 3rd August 2004

Dismantling the other : Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Decolonizing the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature

Chandrani Biswas

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; It is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against the same stunting, dwarfing background. Homecoming, Ngugi wa Thiong'o¹.

A representative of post-colonial nationalist reconstruction in Kenya, Ngugi considers literature to be a product of the complex, historical, economic and political processes that shape and affect the social order in a significant manner. Ngugi's view of literature is invariably linked with his vision about the role of a writer in a rapidly changing society. In the context of a chequered history of colonization, the writer ceases to be an imaginative chronicler of human lives but is persuaded to take a certain partisan attitude to the environment around him as Ngugi observes

..... Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the people, of the side of those social forces that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. *Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics*²

Decolonising The Mind (1981) marks the culmination of a long-standing debate related to the language question in literature discussed in Ngugi's earlier works such as *Writers in Politics*, *Barrel of a Pen*, *Homecoming* and other-essays. In the Preface to the book, Ngugi expands the scope of the debate, asserting that Kenya may be taken as a case study representing the language issue in the entire continent. As a writer and theoretician, an observer and activist who has witnessed the diverse phases of cultural colonization in Kenya, Ngugi places the language debate in a realistic perspective. The book is also emblematic of a radical decision taken by Ngugi in his creative career as he observes; "This book, *Decolonising the Mind* is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way".³

It is noteworthy that Ngugi chooses language as one of the many determinants of culture that shapes the identity and future of a colonized nation. But language in itself is not the focal point of interest in Ngugi's argument, rather it is seen as a undeniably crucial element utilized by the colonizers to dominate and suppress the indigenous cultures of an African nation. Language has been one of the primary targets in the imperialist agenda of colonizing powers. Besides employing innumerable methods of political domination, the colonizing forces have effectively used a deadly weapon in suppressing the identity of the colonized people – that which Ngugi points out in his Introduction.

The cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages. In their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own.⁴

Ngugi's anti-imperialist vision of a regenerated Kenyan society is presented in the form of four core chapters in his book – *The Language of African literature*, *The Language of African Theatre*, *The Language of African fiction* and *the Quest for Relevance*. Though Ngugi specifically relates to the history of Kenya, he establishes frequent and identifiable links between the colonized history of Kenya

and that of other nations in the continent. Ngugi's prime aim in these chapters is to gradually unfold the strategies, political and cultural, employed by the colonizers to subjugate, marginalize, and finally erase out the identities of several African nations. Ngugi subtly exposes the various systems and structures of power that defined the identity and future of the nation during and after the national struggle for independence. While adopting a definite political stand, he portrays a basic opposition between the forces of imperialism and capitalism on one hand and the forces of national liberation and socialism on the other. Ngugi makes it amply clear that the ongoing strife between the imperialist and capitalist forces cannot be defined in terms of a facile racist equation – the struggle of the black against the white. In fact, the race question is accompanied by other relevant elements of perpetual exploitation – those of class and wealth. He highlights this issue in *Writers in Politics* where he observes.

..... for as long as there are classes – classes defined by where or how the various people stand in relation to the means of production – a truly human contact in love, joy, laughter, creative fulfillment in labour will never be possible. We can talk meaningfully of class love, class joy, class marriage, class family and class culture.⁵

In the first chapter of his book. Ngugi attempts to place in a critical perspective the language question against the background of the history of colonization involving personal experiences and impersonal commentary. The readers can witness the emergence of two voices in Ngugi's elaborate discourse – the objective voice of the impersonal commentator and the subjective voice of the idealistic thinker. The opening chapter of the book essentially examines the manner in which imperialist forces tried to erase African people's identity by imposing an alien language on their cultural matrix. Ngugi's analysis is interestingly interspersed with personal anecdotes, theoretical propositions and subjective observations. Recollecting his experience as an aspiring writer during his early student years, at 'A Conference of African Writers of English Expression'⁶ Ngugi observes how the imperialist forces strategically employed the politics of exclusion where the main body of work in Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic and other African languages were not considered. Ngugi was intrigued by the fact that

The question was never seriously asked; did what we wrote qualify as African literature? The whole area of literature and audience, and hence of language as determinant of both the national and class audience, did not really figure; the debate was more about the subject matter and the racial origins and geographical habitation of the writer.⁷

Ngugi seems veritably disturbed by the attitude of established African writers to the language question in African literature, writers who seem to gloss over the manipulative strategies of linguistic control exercised by colonialist rulers. He unabashedly highlights the paradoxical role adopted by Leopold Sedar Senghor and even Chinua Achebe with regard to the language issue in determining African national identity.

Thus in 1964, Chinua Achebe, in a speech entitled 'The African Writer and the English Language', said:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to 'use it'.⁸

Ngugi considers this statement to be an obvious paradox as he observes :

The possibility of using mother tongues provokes a tone of levity in phrases like 'a dreadful betrayal' and 'a guilty feeling'; but that of foreign languages produces a categorical positive embrace, what Achebe himself, ten years later, was to describe as this 'fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'.⁹

Ngugi is baffled by the manner in which major African thinkers like Gabriel Okara continue to inspire other African writers to enrich an alien linguistic and literary tradition as Ngugi asks a pertinent question :

Why we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer become so obsessed by taking from his mother tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves; how can we enrich our languages?¹⁰

In this regard, Ngugi portrays the entire process of Imperialist expansion in terms of two paradigms – the education system and the religious institution. The western system of education like Christianity had been introduced by missionaries to attract the ignorant and gullible cross-sections of the Kenyan society in order to create a class of subservient people who would blindly serve the interests of the imperial government. This education system has invariably used an alien method of training native subjects, creating an unbridgeable gap between the perception of his culture and his native environment. Recollecting various incidents from his school days, Ngugi observes how his school administration run by colonial masters punished native students interacting in their mother-tongue and rewarded those who excelled in the language of the colonizers – “Thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves from our world to other worlds.”¹¹

The colonial system of education according to Ngugi is based on the concept of otherhood. The other as understood in theoretical terms is an essentialist Eurocentric formulation that is utilized to highlight the deficiencies that are conceptually located in the black racial entity. In fact in the relational equation between the white and black races, the black is almost always positioned as the ‘other’ to the central Eurocentric notion of self. Difference as a conceptual term primarily refers to racial inequalities that result in relationships of subordination and domination. Very often in race relations, particularly in delineating the oppositions between the white and the black races, there has been a tendency to construe the ‘other’ as negative.

However it is not the race factor only that determines the colonizers’ approach to the medium of instruction in educational institutions. Race and class together constitute the colonizers’ application of an innovative policy of education in the native soil. Having presented the Marxist perspective of the theory of language, Ngugi emphatically draws a graphic picture of the methodology adopted by the colonizers to subjugate the people’s culture by undervaluing the people’s language in their own eyes through a Eurocentric mediation.

The language of an African child’s formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. The language of his conceptualization was

foreign. Thought, in him, took the visible form of a foreign language. So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school became divorced from his spoken language at home For a colonial child, the harmony existing between the three aspects of language as communication was irrevocably broken. This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation. The alienation became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe was always the center of the universe.¹²

The colonial system of education also produced a class of Kenyans who collaborated with the ruling forces specifically during the national freedom struggle. This cross-section of the nation's population procured enviable positions of power in the post-independence period and consistently served the malicious interests of the colonial forces who had apparently left the nation but continued to intervene in national policies through the transnational. This class of people has been aptly termed by Ngugi as the "comprador bourgeoisie".¹³ Quite unabashedly Ngugi includes the African writer in English as a core component of this new class of people, speaking, writing and practising the language of the colonizer as he observes.

The literature it produced in European languages was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in African languages. Yet by avoiding a real confrontation with the language issue, it was clearly wearing false robes of identity: it was a pretender to the throne of the mainstream of African literature. The practitioner of what Janheinz Jahn called neo-African literature tried to get out of the dilemma by over-insisting that European languages were really African languages or by trying to Africanise English or French usage while making sure it was still recognisable as English or French or Portuguese.¹⁴

Though notions pertaining to a sense of self may be influenced through devious methods of political control the cultural identity of

the Kenyans even in the dominant regimes of representation could not be fully dwarfed. Moreover in the opinion of critics like Stuart Hall:

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all It has its histories – and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us.¹⁵

Understandably so, Ngugi shows the manner in which the indigenous languages of Africa continued to live, flourish and grow, irrespective of the colonial intervention. It is a living language, representing the hopes, fears, joys and aspirations of the peasants and the working class – people, who according to Ngugi constitute the backbone of the nation. Ngugi extends his praise also to all those practitioners of African languages – who seem to be torch bearers of a tradition in written literature. Writers like Heruy Walda Sellassie, Germacaw Takla Hawaryat, Shabaan Robert, Abdullatif Abdalla, Ebrahlm Hussein and many others deserve such appreciation.

Though segregated by some quarters of the academic circle, Ngugi continues to interrogate the creative efforts of such writers who like him had expressed themselves in a borrowed language.

The question is this: we as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. Right. But by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit. What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages.¹⁶

It is for these reasons that Ngugi categorically advocates the conscious use of African languages as a vehicle for expressing ones thoughts. It is through his deliberate rejection of the language of the colonizer and the re-employment of Gikuyu as a language of creative expression that Nguigi seems to re-connect himself to “the

revolutionary traditions of an organized peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism and create a higher system of democracy and socialism in alliance with all the other peoples of the world".¹⁷

In the second segment of his book Ngugi takes up the issue of the language used in African theatre. Ngugi's involvement in the people's movement for African theatre was motivated by a question posed by a representative of the downtrodden section of society to a bourgeois writer. She asked "We hear you have a lot of education and that you write books. Why don't you and others of your kind give some of that education to the village? We don't want the whole amount, just a little of it, and a little of your time".¹⁸

The question acts as an external stimulus on the privilege-ridden consciousness of Ngugi who had already been reflecting on the social seriousness of his creative purpose. By now Ngugi has come to realize that the cultural identity of people of his nation is dependent on both a shared sense of collective history, together with the individuality of indigenous groups in their respective ethnic contexts.

While repudiating the attitude of the parasitic comprador bourgeoisie who seek to permanently identify with imperialist models of power, Ngugi stresses the need to instill an awareness about the richness of one's cultural tradition in a significant way. In this regard, Ngugi highlights the relevance of theatre as an effective social medium in Kenyan society. In a heterogeneous society characterized by class stratification, Ngugi considers theatre to be a suitable medium of social change. More so, Ngugi also takes considerable pride in the range and depth of African culture :

Contrary to the myth and fiction of our conquerors, Africa was always in a turmoil of change, with empires rising and falling. African traditional structures and cultures then were neither static nor uniform. There were as many cultures as there were peoples, although we can recognize broad affinities which would make us talk meaningfully of African values or civilizations.¹⁹

He offers a vivid portrait of the social and cultural meaning of drama in Kenyan life with particular emphasis on representation of

ritual and ceremonial practices of African peasants in pre-colonial Kenya. The community involvement in drama is noteworthy in specific social ceremonies such as the Ituka ceremony held in every twenty five years, marking the handing over of power from one generation to another.

Ngugi traces the development of Kenyan drama in three phases, as he talks about "the need to see Africa's cultural history in three broad phases; Africa before white conquest, Africa under colonial domination, and today's Africa striving to find its true self-image".²⁰ He faithfully records the inhuman stereotyping of African people as the naïve or the stupid peasant in many colonial productions. Religious theatre attempted to establish the Christian spirit through stories of the prodigal son and nativity. He remembers the typical English productions of Shakespearean tragedies performed in European controlled theatre buildings between 1948-1952. Even with the Dorovan Maule Theatre and Kenya National Theatre and final achievement of independence in 1963, there was no considerable change in the status quo. However Kenyan theatre in the early seventies was trying to sever all links with the European dominated Kenya National theatre. Ngugi again accuses imperialism for retarding the spontaneous development of "the national traditions of theatre rooted in the ritual and ceremonial practices of the peasantry. The real language of African theatre could only be found among the people – the peasantry in particular – in their life, history and struggles".²¹

It was with such missionary zeal that Ngugi commenced the Kamiruthu experiment –

Kamiruthu then was not an aberration, but an attempt to reconnection with the broken roots of African civilization and its traditions of theatre.... Indeed Kamiruthu reconnected itself to the national tradition of the empty space, of language, of context, of form.²²

Ngugi strategically incorporated various elements of culture - song and dance into his dramatic presentation in order to convey the commoners' perception of imperialism to the audience through the theatrical medium, Ngugi also brought about necessary alterations in the core components of the play, as suggested by the principal actors:

I remember for instance how one group who worked in a particular department at the nearby Bata Shoe factory sat down to work out the process and quantity of their exploitation in order to explain it all to those of us who had never worked in a factory.²³

The experiment in people's theatre was complete as the show went on successfully for several days, only to be banned by the Kenyan government on 16th November, 1977. From here onwards, Ngugi had to enter into a continuous struggle with the Imperialist forces in order to prevent the spirit of the people to be dwarfed by forces of coercion perpetrated by the state. The Kamiruthu experiment taught many useful lessons to Ngugi in terms of an ongoing struggle – as he observes:

It has led me to prison, yes; it got me banned from teaching at the University of Nairobi, yes; and it has now led me into exile. But as a writer it has also made me confront the whole question of the language of African theatre – which then led me to confront the language of African fiction.²⁴

The third segment of the book proposes to analyse Ngugi's method of resisting the techniques of domination used by the imperialist forces in subjugating his questing consciousness. Having attempted to redefine his position vis-à-vis the people's theatre, Ngugi experiments with a type of literary production, which was specifically bourgeois in its origins - the novel. Ngugi expresses his apprehensive anxieties about the manner in which he could experiment with a form which was so opposed to the aspirations and interests of the struggling sections of the population. Along with the question of appropriating an alien cultural medium to the requirements of an indigenous population, Ngugi also had the language question in his mind, as he observes:

There were two interrelated problems of 'fiction language' vis-à-vis a writer's chosen audience; his relationship to the form, to the genre itself, and his relationship to his material, that is to the reality before him. How would he handle the form? How would he handle the material before him.²⁵

Ngugi relates the manner in which he drew upon the influences of the continental masters in determining his approach to the new medium – his literary models initially were Joseph Conrad and George Lamming, the range and scope of his fiction broadened with his closer acquaintance with continental writers. The incorporated diverse narrative strategies together with innovative techniques in time and space in his early novels such as *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. But the nature of Ngugi's presentation of reality remained essentially the same. In spite of his effectiveness in portraying the reality of neo-colonialism in his fiction in English, Ngugi felt the imminent need to reach out to a cross-section of readers who would readily identify with a subjective picture.

At several points of his creative effort, Ngugi also thought of bringing about a desirable fusion of the novel form and the oral tradition of Kenya. Undoubtedly at the moment of colonial intervention, the oral literatures of Kenya were far advanced and richer than the written literatures of the period. His novel in Gikuyu *Caĩtaani Mũtharabaini* remained Ngugi's most intriguing experiment in his creative career. Negotiation with encouraging publishers led him to assert :

A novel originally written in Ibo could find itself translated into Yoruba and vice versa. A novel written in Dholuo or Maasai could find itself translated into two or three more Kenyan languages or into African languages outside Kenya. There could thus be a real dialogue between the literatures, languages and cultures of the different nationalities within any one country - forming the foundations of a truly national literature and culture, a truly national sensibility.²⁶

In the final segment of the book, Ngugi analyses the application of the language issue to the developing body of African poetry. He also contends about the way in which the indigenous literature is presented in the school, college and university curriculum. Ngugi's contention actually reaches a valid conclusion as he delineates the social, political and cultural hazards encountered by him in building up the basis of a national culture. Tracing the multiple phases of the colonial policy of education, Ngugi highlights the way in which Eurocentric thoughts have been uselessly mediated through works

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of eminent writers such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Balzac, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gorky and Brecht. At the center of the colonial education was the constitution of a colonial discourse that critically affected the African's self-image African children encountered themselves through the perspective of the European colonial masters. Persistence and continuation of repetitive stereotypes hindered the process of self-definition and self-fashioning, the seeds of which were sown by Ngugi theoreticians, writers and activists like Ngugi in terms of the use of one's own native language.

The new approach adopted by people like Ownor Anyumba, Taban Lo Liyong and Ngugi was to subvert the hackneyed stereotypes continuously misused by the colonizers in order to reorient "Kenya, East Africa and then Africa in the centre"²⁷ of perception. The growth and development of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi, according to Ngugi was a positive step towards the process of decolonisation.

In fact Ngugi extends the contours of his ever-developing humanist vision to encompass not merely the marginalized people of his continent but tries to build bridges across the continents to includes all black people and all classes of oppressed humanity across the world. He succeeds in a way to transcend the limits of nation and ethnic affiliation to project an idealistic vision of a new world, though unarguably "Ngugi's conception of the writer's potential in politics is essentially that of the avant-garde of left modernism"²⁸

The critical journey undertaken by Ngugi consisted at several junctures an interrogation of several existing patterns of knowledge perpetuated by the colonizing and imperialist forces – in the realm of politics and that of culture, through the medium of literature and fine arts, religion and education system. After identifying the root cause of the malady of perception, Ngugi advocated a kind of dialectical negation of the colonial process, dismantling the "psychological structures"²⁹ shaping the consciousness of African people in a sustained manner for a considerable period of time.

Throughout Ngugi's anti-imperialist discourse Ngugi speaks for a human solidarity, power, independence and struggle at the individual level as well as the collective level of survival. Failure in one aspect of understanding does not disempower African people

or render them dysfunctional in a changed social order. Rather it is their undying spirit of resilience and indomitable courage to struggle against all odds that makes Ngugi dream of a resurrected community of people in a regenerated society as he observes :

This is what this book on the politics of language in African literature has really been about: national, democratic and human liberation. The call for the rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation. It is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind. The language of struggle. It is the universal language underlying all speech and words of our history. Struggle. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being. The struggle begins wherever we are; in whatever we do: then we become part of those millions whom Martin Carter once saw sleeping not to dream but dreaming to change the world.³⁰

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The Politics of Fiction in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*.

Sreemati Mukherjee

The title of Bessie Head's (1937-1986) quasi autobiographical novel sets the parameters of its discursive universe which is the "question" of power. Published in 1973 and set in both apartheid ridden South Africa and Botswana, the novel is one of the most disturbing and compelling explorations of the nature of power in its racial, cultural, social and sexual manifestations. Written within the overarching assumptions of realism, the text breaks down from time to time in its attempt to contain the horror of the protagonist's mental and emotional life, within the parameters of realism. In a world where dream, nightmare, hallucination and actual events, cross, slide and jolt into each other, the protagonist Elizabeth, a thinly veiled version of Head herself, carries out nightmarish negotiations with culture, history, race, class and writing.

Born of a black father and a white mother in 1937, in a mental institution at Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, where her mother had been incarcerated because she had had sexual relations with a black stable hand, Bessie Head, had her birth outlawed by the Immorality Act of South Africa, which forbade the sexual union of black and white. Mulatto's who lived under the label "Coloured," in South Africa, had almost the same lives of grinding poverty and wretchedness that the blacks did. Growing up in a foster home till she was thirteen, Bessie Head was then sent to St Monica's Home, an Anglican mission school for Coloured girls, where the principal missionary greeted her with two items of information, both of which were psychologically damaging for her. One was that the woman that she had so long looked upon and loved as her mother was simply her foster mother, and the following was about her actual mother:

Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get Insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy who was a native (Head, *A Woman Alone*, 4)

Elizabeth, Head's protagonist in the story, also has a similar background and life. Head herself admits the autobiographical core of *A Question of Power*. In *A Woman Alone*, a text packed with autobiographical reminiscences, speculations about the nature of art and her own theoretical and critical ideas about the novel as an art form, Bessie Head offers the following observations about *A Question of Power*. She says,

My third novel, *A Question of Power*, had such an intensely personal and private dialogue that I can hardly place it in the context of the more social and outward looking work I had done. It was a private philosophical journey to the sources of evil (15).

In this context, I am reminded of Renee Larriere's comment in *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean*, that many of these first person narratives surfacing in women's writing in the postcolonial world, carry a double inscription of authority or authorship, which she calls "double auteur(ite)," (1) because of the conflation of the female narrator with the female actor or subject in the story. This gives such autobiographical narratives like Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Bridge of Beyond* (*Pluie et vent sur Telumee Miracle*), or Maxine Hong Kingston's *A Woman Warrior*, the double sanction of the validity of woman's experience in terms of race, class, gender and history. In her essay, "Issues, Terms and Contexts," Teresa de Lauretis argues that the female self can only emerge out of the "materiality of her writing," and the "historicity of her experience."¹ Although, Lauretis does not talk about autobiography per se, Huma Ibrahim, in her book length study on Head entitled *Subversive Identities in Exile*, uses Teresa Lauretis's argument to posit that for Head, "the act of writing autobiography often merges with the politics of "resistance" (6). Editors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in the book *De/Colonizing the Subject*, would call this act of autobiography, also an act of "decolonization" (xlii-xxviii).

In 1964, Head left South Africa on a one way exit permit, to take up the life of an exile/refugee in Botswana. In *A Woman Alone*, a title that resonates with the loneliness of the author's subject position, Head elaborates on why she had to leave South Africa:

[t]he environment completely defeated me, as a writer. I just want people to be people, so I had no way of welding all the people together into a cohesive whole.

I have attempted to solve my problem by at least writing in an environment where the people are welded together by an ancient order. Life in Botswana cannot be compared in any way to life in South Africa because here people live very secure lives, in a kind of social order shaped from centuries past by the ancestors of the tribe....(62)

Elizabeth her protagonist in *A Question of Power*, has similar feelings about South Africa,

She hated the country. In spite of her inability to like or to understand political ideologies, she had also lived the backbreaking life of all black people in South Africa. It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you (19).

The words "permanent nervous tension," should remind us of Sartre's comment in his introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that,

[t]he status of "native" is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent.²

Bessie Head, who "never had any frame of reference to anything beyond" herself (Head, *A Woman Alone*, 3), found in Botswana:

..the most unique and distinguished country in the whole of Africa. It is a land that was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers and so a bit of ancient Africa, in all its quiet and unassertive grandeur, has remained intact there (Head, *A Woman Alone*, 66).

In her analysis of the various components of Head's writing, Huma Ibrahim contends that Head demonstrates what could be called the "exilic consciousness," which is a condition of both belonging and not belonging to any particular country, tradition, culture, language and even gender (Ibrahim, 2) Maria Olaussen echoes a similar view when she connects the estrangement in Head's writing with that of Cixous:

[t]he connection to writing is in both Head and Cixous linked to the arbitrariness of borders, to the experience of being a stranger, and to the maintenance of borders through a distinction between being clean and unclean (Olaussen 198).

Botswana, as Head and Elizabeth both found out, was home to intense intra racial hatred. Not only were Head/Elizabeth discriminated upon and treated as the unclean stranger for their mulatto status, the Botswana practiced an intense racial hatred towards a tribe called the Masarwa, which becomes the subject of Head's novel *Maru* (1971). As Head exclaims about this situation in *A Woman Alone*,

I knew the language of racial hatred but it was an evil exclusively practiced by white people. I therefore listened in amazement as Botswana people talked of the Masarwa people whom they oppressed:

They don't think," they said. "They don't know anything"(69).

Thus, even though, particular, specific and regional to some extent, Bessie Head's vision of evil, of history, and of race take on a cosmic dimension, which recalls to my mind the vision of cosmic evil that *King Lear* offers us. As Head admits in *A Woman Alone*,

..It was important to my development to choose a broader platform for my work, so I have avoided political ideologies because I felt that they falsify truth. It was necessary for me concentrate directly on people because I believe it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden, unknown God or devil (63).

The central theme of *A Question of Power* could be said to be the idea of power as an omnipresent principle of everyday life. Power is shown and seen to operate at the social, psychological, political, spiritual and sexual levels. One will notice the similarity in Head's position on power, with that of Foucault.³ The unusual angle that Head brings to the discourse of power is that she reveals spirituality to be as predicated on power, as any other hierarchical relationship in society. Also, in a view that could be called extremely Hindu, she shows the contiguity of good and evil, in her ultimate concept of godhood or Divinity. In this context, we must remember that Head broke with institutionalized forms of Christianity, fairly early in life. As Gillian Stead Eilersen, informs us in the biographical work *ThunderBehind Her Ears* :

Hinduism's all-embracing philosophy was diametrically opposed to the strict and narrow version of Christianity on which she had been fed for seven years. Its vast conglomerate of beliefs, making it tolerant of other religions and not compelling its followers

to adopt any particular rites or sacraments, appealed to her strong individualism (33).

The use of alternative philosophies, religions and value systems to forge a sense of one's own values, to use them as tools for negotiating reality, become vital components of Head/Elizabeth's postcolonial exilic consciousness. The philosophical underpinnings of Head's novel are somewhat confusing as are her representations of Hinduism, her use of the Kali image, which she calls Mahamaya (98), and her conflation of Kali with the completely negative implications of the Medusa figure of Western mythological traditions. Yet, in a letter now to be found in the Khama Memorial Museum at Serowe, Botswana, which houses all the Bessie Head papers, Head penetrates deeper into the philosophical implications of the Kali image when she calls her the "universal Mother" who "takes away the last trace of ego and merges it in the consciousness of the Absolute,"⁴

One of the central realizations that Elizabeth has in this novel is that she has neglected the condition of the poor in all her previous births, and in this birth it is the significance of the common man that she must celebrate. Head's belief in the Hindu/Buddhist/Jain doctrine of reincarnation, become Elizabeth's too. As Head admits in *A Woman Alone*,

The canvas on which I have worked was influenced by the Hindu view of rebirth and reincarnation. Such a belief influences one to the view that each individual, no matter what their present origin or background may be, is really the total embodiment of human history, with a vast accumulation of knowledge and experience stored in the subconscious mind (77).

Elizabeth abjures all the power and privilege of the center and chooses ordinariness as a form of identity politics because she feels that she has never appreciated before the implications of being completely "ordinary" in terms of one's political, economic and social position. Although she is a "a product of the slums and hovels of South Africa," (26) where people "hated any black person among them who was 'important,'" (26) Elizabeth has a burning realization during the excruciating phase of her mental breakdown in Botswana, that she had never really, "made an identification with the poor and the humble" (31). Henceforth, ordinary people whose lives had been

marked by suffering became her teachers. Regarding her own attitude towards humble folk, Head says,

..the immense suffering black people experience in South Africa had created in me a reverence for ordinary people (Head, *A Woman Alone*, 63).

A Question of Power is an intensely psychological novel. It records the experience of a mental breakdown and Elizabeth's dealings with three hallucinatory figures, Sello, Dan and the Medusa, all of whom happen to be black. Sello, is a prophet like figure, almost corresponding to the Hindu concept of avatar. Although, in his present avatar as Sello, he had "acquired the kind of humility which made him feel, within, totally unimportant..." (11), in his previous incarnations he was linked to depravity, lust, cruelty and power. In what comes across as a critique of Hinduism too, Elizabeth reads him as "Rama" and "Krishna" and "the originator of the caste system (44). His power was linked to that of the Medusa in his previous incarnations and regarding their joint operations this is the narratorial comment that Elizabeth offers:

There wasn't any kind of perversion and depravity they did not practice. Till today it lingers like a dark psychological stream of horrors in the courts of law (42).

Yet, it is Sello who seems to embody the entire psychological history of the human being within him, who embodies each step of the ascent from evil to good, who shows Elizabeth the truth that ordinary people who have been "killed and killed and killed again in one cause after another for the liberation of mankind," are "God." (31). He makes Elizabeth realize that an "absolute" title like "God" must be shared (31). This is Sello's universal vision that seems to echo Vivekananda, whose thought had had a great influence on Head, and as Eilersen informs us in her biography, Head had not only read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, but also thought of herself as a reincarnation of Vivekananda (Eilersen, 129).⁵

The Medusa is the most challenging of the nightmarish, hallucinatory figures that Elizabeth encounters. She is perhaps a projection of the intensely aggressive instincts within Elizabeth herself, several evidences of which are present in the text (170). Regarding her own conscious and unconscious complicity with evil,

Head makes the following statement in a letter which refers to her own breakdown, very similar to the one Elizabeth is having in this text:

I experienced a state of mind where I was completely deprived of the assurance that I could not be evil too. It horrified me. It was like an endless death and imprisonment from which I could not escape.⁶

The Medusa therefore becomes a symbolic figure who executes all Head's/Elizabeth's notions of the nightmarish dimensions of power, and hatred. She is introduced by Elizabeth as "...the first of the power maniacs who knew their business, and knew what they could get out of being God." (42) Dan and the Medusa work together. Initially Elizabeth is romantically attracted to Dan, but she soon realizes his almost limitless promiscuity and that he stands to negate all Sello's teaching about humility and self abnegation. Elizabeth's final resolution of the Medusa figure in her mind, resolves her conflict with Dan too. In this paper, owing to the simultaneity of Medusa and Dan, we are simply going to elaborate on Elizabeth's tussle with the Medusa.

The challenge that the Medusa throws out at Elizabeth, is on two pivotal levels—the sexual and the psycholinguistic. She shocks Elizabeth into a realization of her own sexual inadequacy, a factor that unnerves Elizabeth:

Medusa was smiling. She had some top secret information to impart to Elizabeth. It was about her vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation traveled out of her towards Elizabeth. It enveloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep, sensuous bomb. It was like falling into deep, warm waters, lazily raising one hand and resting in a heaven of bliss. Then she looked at Elizabeth and smiled, a mocking superior smile:

"You haven't got anything near that, have you:" (44).

The Medusa next taunts Elizabeth, with her lack of knowledge of African language, and points to her inability to belong. She says,

Africa is troubled waters, you know. I'm a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages." (44)

Although, Elizabeth is undergoing nightmare, she retains enough lucidity of mind to assess and reject the Medusa's power that rested simply on the externals of culture:

The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut-in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power-worship running through it, and power people needed small, narrow, shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide flexible universe where there were too many cross currents of opposing thought (38).

Maria Olausson's comment about the Medusa provides a useful framework of analysis for the final turn that the novel takes. Olausson's comment also becomes a way of reading Head/Elizabeth:

The Medusa is the result of transcendence and her monstrosity can only be counteracted through a return to the specific (Olausson, 195).

The implications of Olausson's statement are that an experience of moral, psychological and intellectual horror can be combated by taking refuge in specific activities which gear the mind to the present moment. Within the rubric of specific activities in the novel, are Elizabeth's efforts to look after her son Shorty. Another aspect of the specific in the novel is located in gardening activities. Agriculture also plays a redeeming role in Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*, where the stranger Makhaya is able to integrate himself into his new community by joining and vigorously pursuing agricultural activities. Elizabeth does the same—in fact, gardening gives her the lifeline while she is haunted by the three figures of her nightmarish existence. She becomes part of a new community and the key figure in integrating her into this new community, despite her reputation as mentally imbalanced, is a South African man named Eugene. Eugene is also an exile—in this case, a white South African. Exile translates itself into community building for Eugene where he teaches the people of draught ridden Botswana, basic agricultural and economic activities for survival and also self sufficiency. Elizabeth becomes part of this community, and the only relief she has from her nightmarish encounters with Dan, Medusa and Sello, is when she engages in gardening activities with Kenosi.

The two women grow tomatoes, cabbages, green beans and carrots and sell them at the local industries selling area. While

talking about the cape gooseberry which grows well in this garden, Elizabeth brings out the miraculous and regenerative power that is contained in nature.

The work had a melody like that—a complete stranger like the Cape Gooseberry settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng. It loved the hot, dry Botswana summers as they were a replica of the Mediterranean summers of its home in the Cape (153).

One notices the reference to music and harmony in these lines, which also become an index of Elizabeth glimpsing harmony as a part of life. Elizabeth becomes part of an international community comprising of people from South Africa like Eugene and herself, the Danish woman Brigitte, the American volunteer Tom, and Botswana people like Kenosi, to submerge herself in basic activities of community support and building. The novel ends with these lines,

As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging (206).

This act of belonging that the text enacts after a nightmarish mental breakdown, although commendable, is not achieved without inner contradictions and ambiguities. The chief of these contradictions is the discourse of megalomania that surrounds Elizabeth, and by extension Head. Elizabeth sees herself as Sello's companion through several incarnations, and feels that she is the epitome of spiritual power. One such instance of unusual claim is when she says towards the end,

Maybe, the work she and Sello had done together had introduced a softness and tenderness into mankind's history... They had perfected together the ideal of sharing everything and then perfectly shared everything with all mankind (202).

Her claiming of a prophet status at the end of the text through the statement, "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet (206), counteracts or diminishes her previous claim that she would have to earn a rosette as a prize in this life that would be "...symbolic of the brotherhood of man." (37).

The evasiveness or contradiction that appertains to the notion of power in this text, is also realized through Elizabeth's or Head's treatment of the issue of power as it relates to gender. Unlike

Cixous's Medusa who becomes a symbol of the multiplicity of women's desire and also her creativity, Head's Medusa functions as a wholly negative figure.⁷ Olausson provides an excellent reason for this negatively polarized presentation. Head, she says, was deeply influenced by the demand for "phallic supremacy" in the writings of D.H. Lawrence, who was one of her favourite authors (Olausson, 227). According to Olausson, the Medusa "embodies a femininity which does not exist for the service of man" (Olausson, 208), and that accounts for Head's negative portrayal to her. Ultimately, the Medusa is reduced to a woman who wipes Sello's feet, and that is the point of textual resolution vis a vis Elizabeth's relationship to her. Ultimately, the relative power of the phenomenal world that the Medusa stands for, if we accept her as "Mahamaya, the Weaver of Illusions"(98), has to submit to the soul power of Elizabeth and Sello, the basis of which relationship is described by Elizabeth as "masculine." (24).

The text is riddled with ambiguities, because Elizabeth herself embodies a radical alterity, which is not subsumed under the dominant gender paradigm erected in the text. Are we therefore to assume, that the arrogance of the narrator position absolves or frees Elizabeth from such a subjection and submission? Or that, when it comes to herself, she can arrogate power without any stigma attaching itself to her? Elizabeth's last lines when she sets herself up as a "prophet," seem elitist and hierarchical:

The same elitism inheres in her treatment of other aspects of gender in the text. Although the Medusa's power is treated with hostility, Elizabeth would never have reclaimed herself through her struggles, if she was without power herself. Averse to power in a woman that is independent of man, Elizabeth is herself an example of such independence. Head too claims a great deal of power for herself when she declares in *A Woman Alone*, that she is a "didactic" (62) writer who works from "pre-planned conclusions,"(62) and that she works with "great force and authority." (63). How is such power reconciled with the image of the Medusa who becomes transformed into complete submission to Sello, and merges with the figures of Mary and the Buddha's wife?

The text remains in a state of ambiguity, performing an uneasy dialectic between the wholly good and wholly evil images of womanhood that Elizabeth/Head constructs. Maria Olausson's

comment regarding female subjectivity, sexuality and madness is worth considering in this context. Olausson says,

Women's madness and female sexuality are often read as the linked locus or outward sign of a radical opposition to a patriarchal discourse which limits and defines women for the benefit of male self-definition...the possibility of reading female sexuality and madness as an expression of the female self which cannot be contained within the male discourse and which thus constitutes a radical alterity is not present here (200).

There is a straining in the text to achieve universality, at the cost of the contingent, the bodily, the local and the specific. The universalist claims of the end, where Elizabeth sees herself as a "prophet" of the people is achieved at the cost of ignoring the implications of her own body. I am referring to that moment in the text when Elizabeth is aware of "bliss" because of the "sensuous bomb" that the Medusa has sent out. Perhaps an unacknowledged attraction to maternal or female bodies comes out at this moment. However, it is immediately dismissed as "not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then if necessary "(44).

The universalist, humanist approach is backed up by Head's sense of her own gender neutrality in her writing:

Writing is not a male/female occupation. My femaleness was never a problem to me, not now, not in our age....I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless (Head, *A Woman Alone*, 95).

Thus, finally, the politics of autobiography, of "resistance," of "decolonization," and fiction, merge to create "the novel form" which in Head's words is "like a large rag-bag into which one can stuff anything—all one's philosophical, social and romantic speculations." (Head, *A Woman Alone*, 64). In *A Woman Alone*, Head continues,

I have always reserved a special category for me as a writer—that of a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future. It would seem as though Africa rises at a point in history when world trends are more hopefully against exploitation, slavery and oppression—all of which has been synonymous with the name, Africa. I have recorded whatever hopeful trend was presented to me in an attempt to shape the future, which I hope will be one of dignity and compassion (64).

Yet, the entire enterprise of writing often seems to be imbued with the colonized or native subject's ambiguous and ambivalent and paradoxical relationship to power, history, culture and language. Although, Africa is affirmed till the very end, and the special lessons in humility and self abnegation that it can teach the world emphasized, a post structuralist reading would say that the text denies or represses some of its profoundest implications. Thus, fiction in this context emerges as paradox. However, despite its masculinist bias which seems to echo some of the central premises of European Humanism on the gendered division of power, *A Question of Power* is a unique text in the postcolonial tradition, because it redefines and rewrites the spiritual history of humankind, not only by reinstating the common man at the center of discourse but by extending the idea of spiritual greatness to masses of people who have suffered but whose names are not known in the way the names of Christ and Buddha are known. As Craig Mckenzie states in *Bessie Head*, published for the Twayne's World Authors Series,

Head had long been considered a pioneer and a source of inspiration both for her fellow black South African woman writers (Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo, Lauretta Ngcobo, and others) and those farther afield (Alice Walker, Angela Carter, Nikkin Giovaani, Toni Morrison) (15).

Notes :

1. Teresa de Lauretis; "Issues, Terms and Contexts." *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*. Ed. Teresa de Lauretis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 9.
2. Jean Paul Sartre. Preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (Les Damnés de la Terre) London: Penguin Books, 1967. 17.
3. I am referring to Foucault's view that all forms of knowledge become discursive practices that become implicated in the networks of power through the coercive dimensions that they acquire. Refer Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books. 1977, 1980. 116-118.
4. Bessie Head Letter. Khama Memorial Museum 47. Bessie Head Papers 40. 30.12.1978.

5. Swami Vivekananda, *My India, the India Eternal*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Institute of Culture. 1993.103.

6. Bessie Head Letter. Khama Memorial Museum 76. Bessie Head Papers 21. 15. 5. 76.

7. Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Feminisms*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997. 347-362.

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Reading Carey Reading Malley

Bill Ashcroft

There is a moment in *My Life as a Fake* when Christopher Chubb considers, not for the last time, "the blasphemous possibility that he had, with his own pen, created blood and bone and a beating heart" (Carey 2003: 152). This point of despair in Chubb marks the beginning of our understanding of the novel's reading of the Ern Malley hoax. For the novel demonstrates what the hoax itself revealed, if only we could see it, that real life can be created by the text. Moreover, hoaxes themselves deconstruct our belief in an historical truth by demonstrating that truth and lie, history and hoax, are a function of narrative. Both gain life by the stories told about them. The stories that survive as truth are the stories that best convince their audience. This goes right to the heart of the invention of history by western modernity and its subsequent domination of the story of the world. This domination empowers the myth of canonical purity from which the hoax emerges. The story told by European history, the story of the triumph of kings and states, the triumph of rationality and the spread of civilization around the world, is a hoax with which colonized societies have had to contend for several centuries. Carey's Malley figure, Bob McCorkle, is not only alive, but speaks with a post-colonial voice that completely destabilizes the tradition of 'civilized' literary discourse which led to the hoax in the first place.

It should come as no surprise that Carey has developed the life of the phantom poet first created by James McAuley and Harold Stewart. Carey has been fascinated, even obsessed, with the narrative function of truth and the ambivalence of lies throughout his career. *My Life as a Fake* brings the Ern Malley hoax within the orbit of an oeuvre that has extracted a huge amount of liveliness from the elusive interaction of truth and lying. But in doing so the hoax becomes the pivot of a number of related themes: the contention that real life can be generated by narrative; the fallibility of memory; the ambivalence of truth; and the power of the novelist to intervene in this contest of histories, this battle of truth and lies. Above all, it sees Ern Malley as a specifically Australian voice, disrupting the canonical truths of European culture. The issue of truth and its function in literature is the driving force of the hoax:

"Think what you like," says Christopher Chubb, "I set out to prove the truth... Truth was dead of rotting. There had been a complete decay of meaning and craftsmanship in poetry" (38). As Carey reads it, Bob McCorkle's poetry hijacks this truth, his poems, as the editor Weiss proclaims, being 'far beyond' the plodding versifier (52). But it is not just that Bob McCorkle's poetry is better than Chubb's, his *voice* articulates a different truth. Truth is not dead so much as transformed. This is a reading of the Ern Malley hoax that no one, neither classicist, modernist or postmodernist has made.

The Hoax

No event has captured the attention, and the imagination, of Australian critics as completely as the Ern Malley hoax. Michael Heyward calls it 'the most decisive piece of literary criticism ever produced in Australia' (Heyward 1993: 238) - although decisive upon whom is debatable - and there is no doubt it is the most notorious event in Australian literary history.¹ No other event in Australian literature managed to focus with such clarity the anti-intellectual bent of Australian society, the bathos of 1940s prudery, the anti-modernism of Australian arts and letters and the struggles of Australian literature trying to process the changes in literary style, not to mention the solemn pretentiousness of the young Max Harris and the *Angry Penguins* modernists. This hoax is indicative not so much of the cultural 'belatedness' of Australian modernism (Carter 1995), or its nature as a 'quarantined culture' (Williams 1995), as of the tenacious and oppressive domination of a civilizing discourse of canonical Literature from which Australian culture is still, to this day, trying to extricate itself. This discourse, invented to 'civilize' India in the nineteenth century has had just as formative a role in Australia.

In the conservative classicism of James McAuley we see the continuation of the anti-modernism that had been vigorously pursued in the thirties by the Australian Academy of Art, whose chief supporter, Attorney General R.G. Menzies, claimed in 1937 to "find nothing but absurdity in much so-called 'modern art'" (Menzies 1937).

¹ The Austlit data base records 242 entries for Ern Malley, a very healthy number for an Australian topic. Most of the entries concentrate on the event itself and its cultural implications for Australian literature. Of the 80 entries on Harold Stewart, over 70 are commentaries on the Ern Malley hoax; of the 383 entries for James McAuley at least a quarter refer to either the relationship or the Malley event. Ern Malley is probably the only Australian hoax to have his own website.

The Ern Malley event – with its mockery of Australian intellectuals, its preference for a conservative rather than modernist cultural cringe, its phobia about experiment and change, its extraordinarily confused censorship, its implied assumption that difference (of whatever kind) is a threat and a criticism of the Australian way of life – is the harbinger of the political flavour of the 1950s.

The events are well known. Wanting to expose the pretension of modernist poetry and the *Angry Penguins* in particular, James McAuley and Harold Stewart wrote sixteen poems as Ern Malley. They sent the manuscript, entitled 'The Darkening Ecliptic,' to Harris with a covering letter from Ethel Malley on behalf of her deceased brother, saying that she had found the manuscript among his things. The *Angry Penguins* editorial board: John Reed, Sunday Reed, Sidney Nolan and Max Harris decided to publish 'The Darkening Ecliptic' in the Autumn edition of their magazine, with Harris's introduction to the poems claiming them to be 'the work of a poet of great power' (Heyward 1993: 57).

The hoax was exposed by the *Sunday Sun* on 25 June 1944 when McAuley and Stewart confessed to creating Ern Malley as a 'serious literary experiment'. (Heyward 1993: 137). They confessed to plagiarising from 'a chance collection of books which happened to be on our desk: the concise Oxford Dictionary, Collected Shakespeare, Dictionary of Quotations, Ripman's Rhyming Dictionary and the first three lines of the poem 'culture as exhibit' were lifted, from a quotation, straight from the American report on the drainage of breeding grounds of mosquitoes' (Heyward 1993: 138). The *Sunday Sun* and other tabloids were delighted with the hoax, the *Bulletin* publishing the comment: 'earnest thanks to the diggers who are joint debunkers of Bosh, Blah and Blather' (Harris 1987: 13). Intellectual experimentation was considered to be an affront to the Australian public and McAuley and Stewart had targeted their audience well.

The event descended to absurdity when, on 5 September, the South Australian police took action against the content of some of the Ern Malley poems and other writing published in *Angry Penguins*. Detective Vogelsang, acting for the South Australian police, plummeted to the nadir of the whole affair when he objected to the word 'incestuous' because, as he stated, 'I don't know what

that means but I think there is a suggestion of indecency about it'. (Harris 1987: 13) Harris was found guilty of publishing indecent material and fined five pounds.

The circumstances are so extraordinary that it is hardly surprising that critical discussion has focussed on the events of the hoax. Many of the articles written on the affair report with glee that Ern Malley has become better known than Harold Stewart if not James McAuley. But in the main, little attention has been paid to the poetry itself. David Musgrave and Peter Kirkpatrick, in their article "Friction as a Social Process" (2000), were perhaps the first to offer a concerted textual and contextual analysis of Malley's oeuvre in its own right. But this attention to the text of the poems reminds us that Malley's life is equally textual. To read Ern Malley through Peter Carey is to connect the events with the poetry, to see the life and the poetry as inhabiting the same text, to suggest that Ern Malley's life demonstrates the textuality of all lives. Ern Malley – as Carey suggests, and Max Harris emphatically believes – *lives*. But reading the transgressive text of Ern Malley's life is to see how culturally disruptive and resistant it has become.

What fascinates us about Ern Malley is that the poetry seems to work. It is possibly more comprehensible than Harris's own "Elegiac for Ern Malley" included in the *Angry Penguins* number ("The heaving waters turn black and blind, as if they had embraced the sun, or seen the perfect disaster regimented across the bedroom mirror" Harris 1987: 65). Malley has bequeathed to Australian literature some of its most resonant and quotable quotes; "I am the black swan of trespass on alien shores"; "the emotions are not skilled workers". In some respects the tables were turned on the hoaxers, who, as Sir Herbert Read suggested, 'had hoaxed themselves'. When the hoax occurred Harris wired the eminent critic for support and Read's cable read, "I too would have been deceived by Ern Malley but hoaxers hoisted by their own petard as touched off unconscious sources or inspiration work too sophisticated but has elements of genuine poetry" (Harris 1987: 8). Read believed that McAuley and Stewart had hoaxed themselves because the poetry showed 'effective use of vivid metaphor, a subtle sense of rhythmic variation ... even a metaphysical unity which cannot be the result of unintelligent deception', a concept that the poets had not believed possible.

Despite McAuley and Stewart's belief that the poems were all 'absurd', the process they used to create poetry was not immune to the authors' preoccupations, nor their compulsion to make sense, nor their feeling for the simple music of the lines. The choice of words, the use of images and the poets' need to make the poems poetic by the use of rhyme schemes, ended up 'hoisting them on their own petard,' as Read claimed. The poems are littered with conscious allusions to their fraudulent nature, which give them a very definite and transgressive identity. But ironically, the reiteration of his fraudulent identity, like the textual fabrication of his life, only serves to make the phantom author more real:

... "I had read in books that the mind repeats / In its ignorance
the vision of others." ('Durer: Innsbruck 1495')

... "It is necessary to understand / That a poet may not exist,
that his writings / Are the incomplete circle and straight drop /
Of a question mark ('Sybilline')

... Now we find, too late / That these distractions were clues /
To a transposed version / Of our too rigid state ('Palinode')

... Yet we are as the double almond concealed in one shell
(*'Colloquy With John Keats'*)

... In the year 1943 / I resigned to the living all collateral images
/ Reserving to myself a man's / Inalienable right to be sad / At
his own funeral (*'Petit Testament'*)

... It is something to be at last speaking / Though in this No-
Man's-language appropriate / Only to No-Man's-land (*'Petit
Testament'*)

The textual construction of Ern Malley's non-existence rebounds on itself to become the thing that gives him life. This is one question that impels this study of the phenomenon: How do we come to know about a life? Is the historical record, or the memory, for that matter, of James McAuley's life any less textual, in the end, than that of Ern Malley? Ern Malley's irruption into reality impels Carey's novel. For its emphasis is *'My Life as a Fake'*.

This textuality is a continuation of a textual construction that begins, not with McAuley and Stewart's Saturday afternoon lark, but with Ethel Malley's letter. When reading the letter it is not hard to see why Harris was duped. Whatever the quality of the poems, there

is no doubt that Ethel's letter produces the simulacrum of a real person. Who could not avoid the hope that the bicycle mechanic might have produced something of real merit? But this is only the beginning. For over the years Ern Malley has become a figure as palpable as the hero of Carey's novel. A subtle sub-plot in *My Life as a Fake* involves the comparative power of writer and publisher in producing a life. When Weiss tells Chubb that McCorkle's poems are beyond him, that he was incapable of writing what he wrote, he responds: "What hubris-*lah*. Takes the brèath away. I reminded him that I was the one who made Bob McCorkle, not just the words, but also cut up his head and legs and body. I physically pasted him together." Weiss's response cuts to the heart of the textual life of Ern Malley: "Doesn't matter, he said. I am his publisher" (52).

The publisher rather than the writer produces the palpable and circulating text, a text that lies outside the consciousness of Chubb. At one point in the novel Chubb brings Sarah a fragment of McCorkle's unpublished work. As we find out later, he had torn this page from the manuscript. To her "It slashed and stabbed its way across the page, at once familiar and alien" (26) – a very different prospect than his own constipated efforts. "Rereading the fragment, I felt that excitement in my blood which is the only thing an editor should trust" (27). She is a publisher, an editor of *The Modern Review* and she understands that she has the potential of a life in her hands.

The few attempts made to take the poems seriously, such as Musgrave and Kirkpatrick's and Atherton's, have ignored the publisher to explore the poems as clues to the poets' psychological states. For Atherton the work supports the theory of sub-personalities: 'a semi-permanent and semi-autonomous region of the personallty capable of acting as a person' (2,) in which case Ern Malley betrays the subconscious desires of his creator. This throws the interest back on McAuley and Stewart: the 'life' of Ern Malley is the subconscious life of his creators.

But what if this reading produced an author independent of the two poets' subconscious? What if the author of these poems is not an Author but Ern Malley? What if Ern Malley's voice is a different voice from his authors'? For just as surely as the poems supervene the intentions of the authors, so Ern Malley himself takes flight and becomes realised through the Ern Malley discourse. This is the problem Carey addresses in *My Life as a Fake*. What is it to have a

life? What is involved in the poet having a life? What does it mean to represent that life? But Carey takes this further. For there is another way in which a 'minor literature' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) can emerge, and that is a political transgression, embodied not in the content but in the voice. Carey reads Ern Malley in a way neither his inventors nor publisher could have suspected.

Carey's reading

When Sarah Wode-Douglas, the editor of *The Modern Review*, is persuaded to travel to Kuala Lumpur by aging poet-roué John Slater, she enters "a maze from which, thirteen years later, I have yet to escape" (8). For this is where Christopher Chubb ran his invention, Bob McCorkle, to ground and is now marooned with McCorkle's unpublished work and a child who disowns him, a dual metaphor that drives the story of Chubb's pursuit of the monster he had fathered (153). But the novel is also about Sarah's discovery of her own history; a history that her memory had re-invented, creating a hoax past, so to speak, to protect her from the memory of her mother's gruesome suicide. The third story in this maze is the much more concealed story of the novelist's own capacity to direct, and kill off, the life first given birth by McAuley and Stewart.

It is significant that Bob McCorkle first makes his appearance in the flesh amid the absurdity of the obscenity trial. This is exactly the point at which the hoax got out of hand, and it is the point at which the publisher's rights over the reality of the author take precedence. But it is most significant that the appearance takes place in a court of law when McCorkle interjects – "Ask the author" (59). McCorkle here demonstrates a life apart from either publisher or author. But it is also the first demonstration of the discursive nature of this life: it conflicts with the discourse of the law which has different criteria of truth – "The transcript makes no mention of the heckler or his raw uneducated voice", simply 'Proceedings Interrupted'. (59) This event is a metaphor for the discursive construction of truth. The requirement of truth in court is truth of a particular kind, an interrogatory truth that is entirely determined by the discourse of legal proceedings. 'Truth' is defined by the rules of the discourse of jurisprudence, particularly the interlocutory rules of courtroom testimony: witnesses are asked direct questions and are expected to reply directly. The apparent simplicity of the procedure cannot

hide the fact that even legal 'truth' is a function of the rules of the discourse rather than an absolute given. The law is a function of power and this obliteration of McCorkle resonates with his later cry when he confronts his maker, his 'Father' – Chubb, "I want justice" (152). Chubb has another sobering encounter with the ambivalent relationship between truth and law when the policeman comes to investigate the disappearance of the child. "For the moment he claimed he breathed life into this image, he would be declared a lunatic, and once he was a lunatic he was as good as guilty" (156).

Although the discourse of legal truth does not recognise Bob McCorkle, the deeper struggle is between publisher and author. "... Weiss was an editor. He loved those poems. He would stake his life on them" (62). For Chubb, however, McCorkle holds nothing but scorn: "the only thing Chubb would ever be remembered for was the poetry of Bob McCorkle" (63). Chubb chases the disheveled, rabid McCorkle out of the courtroom and confronts him, in a further irony, in the cemetery, reminding us of the line from "Durer: Innsbruck 1495" - "I have shrunk To an interloper, robber Of dead men's dream" (73). McCorkle is over seven foot tall, the invention larger than life, and he embarks on a tirade, characterized by a loathing of the philistinism that the event seems to suggest about Australian life at the time. But most of all, McCorkle's rage is focused on the plight of his publisher. Quoting with contempt the Oxford definition of publisher as 'One whose business is the issuing of book...', he asks Chubb, "Do you know what a publisher is?" Not an innocent question, as Chubb realises, and the answer is "Bloody right, a friend. A defender of the work. And here was this flat-footed policeman intent on jailing him." (75). "Would any civilized country do such a thing?" he asks, "They have made me hate my country" (76).

This encounter is an interesting moment in the problem of the author's ownership of the text. For the reification of the publisher undermines the author, Chubb, and also the *concept* of the Author. "David Weiss was like a mother, for he had brought me into the world, had given me life... When they called me a fake he never once doubted me" (78). The publisher takes precedence even over the sister, whose letters, "written by someone who claimed that I was dead... the person who wrote those letters was a liar many times over" (79). But the life the publisher cherishes is entirely contained in the words: when McCorkle reveals himself to his beloved publisher the terrified Weiss slips while trying to climb out the window and is killed.

The sister's letter, the poet's words, the publisher's text and the legal criteria of truth – a clash of discourses from which the life of McCorkle issues and transcends. But it is in the recitation of the famous first poem that the cultural significance of Bob McCorkle becomes apparent. There in Melbourne General Cemetery at six o'clock on a winter evening, standing before the astonished Chubb, he recites "Durer: Innsbruck 1495". "The voice, which its original author has always imagined to be some variation of standard BBC English, was here so fierce and nasal, hoarse, ravaged by failure and regret... this man was like a tethered beast, a wild man inside a cage" (81)

I had often, cowed in the slumberous heavy air, Closed my inanimate lids to find it real, As I knew it would be, the colourful pires And painted roofs, the high snows glimpsed at the back, All reversed in the quiet reflecting waters— Not knowing then that Dürer perceived it too. Now I find that once more I have shrunk To an interloper, robber of dead men's dream, I had read in books that art is not easy But no one warned that the mind repeats In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still the black swan of trespass on alien waters.

"This was and was not the poem Chubb had written... What had been clever had now become true, the song of the autodidact, the colonial, the damaged beast of the antipodes" (82). This is perhaps the key moment in the novel, carried not so much in the famous poem, but in the voice, fierce and nasal, ravaged by failure and regret. The BBC voice of canonical literature has become the voice of the colonial, the damaged beast of the antipodes.

This is the story of Carey's own writing and all writing that takes the language of dominance and re-shapes it as a tool to represent a local reality. This is the 'horrific' tale of appropriation. The colonial beast has taken poetry and made it true, given it his own voice. At this point McCorkle, bringing himself and the poem to life with his fierce nasal voice, is the embodiment of post-colonial transformation. Like Tristan Smith, the abject, monstrous other becomes the poetic voice. Like Tristan playing the Hairy Man (Carey 1994: 32, 69, 73) this is Bob McCorkle, given birth by poetry as a hoax, but gaining life through the unmistakable sound of his own voice.

The genius of this is that captures the way in which the poem itself proceeds from an aesthetic apparently deeply embedded in European high modernism, to a localized reference to the poet's own transgressive intrusion - "I am still / The black swan of trespass on alien shores." This is, of course, the first of many subtle references to the poet's non-identity. But it is not merely an intrusion into the *Angry Penguins* publishing scene. In cultural terms it is the intrusion of a rough Australian voice, the 'damaged beast of the antipodes,' into poetry itself. "Now I find that once more I have shrunk / To an interloper, robber of dead men's dream." The post-colonial poet is a 'robber' of the dream of a dying culture, or at least of the dream of its dead exponents, a beautiful description of the literary canon.

This configuration of post-colonial authority in the person of Bob McCorkle is a brilliant reading of the Malley hoax. For it is the intrusion of the Australian voice into the pure discourse of poetry that stands as the *sine qua non* of post-colonial transformation – the capacity to take the discourse of imperial culture and make it work for a local reality. This may be too solemn a description of the mischief that this configuration conceives, but it makes Bob McCorkle, and hence Ern Malley a surprising figure of colonial resistance.

The ravaged voice of McCorkle is one that must always contend with the 'truth' of art, which, like the 'truth' of history, is a function of cultural power perpetuated by nonentities like Chubb. But if history is a narrative controlled by the ideology in whose service it exists, then surely memory retains a truth that stands outside ideology, stands outside the text? This is the point at which Sarah's story (pp. 124-7) is woven into the McCorkle hoax. For memory, on which so many hopes are pinned, is the hoaxer *extraordinaire*. Sarah has hated John Slater since she was a child because she believed her mother had committed suicide over him by drowning herself ('quite simply, he killed her with his cock'. She remembers them 'always kissing' but Slater informs her "It happened exactly once" (125). She remembers her mother drowning but in fact she was under the kitchen table where she had gone to hide when her mother came into the kitchen and cut her throat. "I had not the least memory of this" (129). Sarah believed that 'everyone lied to her' (130) but clearly her memory had lied. "I went to bed with the disconcerting knowledge that almost everything I had assumed about my life was incorrect" (133).

For Carey memory, like history, is a corrigible and elusive narrative. Milan Kundera asserts "If someone could retain in his memory everything he had experienced, if he could at any time call up any fragment of his past, he would be nothing like human beings" (2002: 123). We could add to this that such a total recall would immeasurably impoverish such a being. Those condemned to remember everything would be exiled from narrative. Memory doesn't simply recapitulate the past, it is a function of the changing nature of reality itself. Sarah's memory had protected her completely from the gruesome details of her mother's death but it was a protection, a lie, which came to direct her whole life. The hoax played on her by her memory is a counterpoint to the McCorkle hoax, and operates in a cunning way: the lie of Sarah's memory is superseded Slater's 'true' story, while the 'lie' of McCorkle's poetry, is superseded by the novelist's 'true' story – the real McCorkle. McCorkle is given life by the text, his truth is the 'lie' of Carey's narrative.

The hoax played on Sarah by her memory is the unsettling sub-plot at the heart of the Malley story. The cultural memory with which McCorkle must contend is that memory encapsulated in the "priggish, self-serving and snobbish" (86) poetry of Christopher Chubb. McCorkle's voice, "hoarse, ravaged by failure and regret" (81) is the voice of a post-colonial culture straining against that memory. Once McCorkle stands in the cemetery reciting "Durer: Innsbruck 1495," appropriating the poetry, changing it, everything else can be read in the light of that one symbolic moment. What McCorkle becomes, what Ern Malley has become, is precisely the thing McAuley and Stewart and Chubb didn't want, nor, for that matter, Harris or Weiss: a disruptive, mischievous, unpretty antipodean voice.

Tina, the daughter of Nousette, Chubb's idol and McCorkle's lover –whom McCorkle steals and Chubb pursues – is the embodiment of a particular kind of loss to each of them. For Chubb she is the vital essence of his art itself: "I had know this child for one awful week," he says to Sarah, "but what I had seen was life... I must serve life do you see?" (163). McCorkle's ravaged antipodean voice has stolen this life, stolen the living principle of Chubb's art. But for McCorkle Tina represents the one thing Chubb has denied him – a childhood: "When I hold this child, I feel the weight of everything you stole from me," he says to Chubb. "This I had not expected, but now I know exactly what I want from you... This is a childhood"(153).

This is one of the most resonant metaphors of post-colonial appropriation in literature. The child, the living principle of Chubb's art, becomes McCorkle's child and with the aid of this child he proceeds to build a whole country in words. McCorkle is now a better poet than Chubb could ever be. "If I could write McCorkle's poem," he cries to Sarah, "do you think I would not claim it?" (164). When he battles McCorkle in the Malaysian jungle he says to the giant, "If I could create you, ...did you never fear I might unmake you too?" But Chubb discovers that he can't unmake McCorkle. Not only does he have a life of his own but he is taller and stronger than Chubb and has stolen his child, the life of his own creativity and now that life has been used to undermine the wellsprings of Chubb's own poetry. This is something Sarah sees with an editor's eye: "Bob McCorkle was indeed a genius. He had ripped up history and nailed it back together with its viscera on the outside, all that glistening green truth showing in the rip marks" (235).

The bizarre story of Chubb's pursuit and discovery of McCorkle is Carey's own interpolation of the story, its most significant characteristic being its inventiveness. It is almost as though the novel embarks on a metanarrative to demonstrate that any story might be possible to explain the adventures of McCorkle. Carey is nothing if not a good yarn-spinner and this story - of Chubb's meeting with Tamil schoolteacher, Eton graduate and poisoner, Kanagaratnam Chomley, the Australian headmaster of a Malaysian private school, David Grainger, the chance sighting of McCorkle from the school bus, enlisting the help of the local rajah, and ending up regarded by everyone as the real *hantu* or phantom - is an extravagantly elaborated plot. But this tale of pursuit and expatriation is one headed for a resolution that is not the capture of McCorkle but the function of art to create life, a world, a country: "Bob McCorkle has his country stolen," says Tina, "He came here, knew no names, nothing, our job has been to gather all the names for him" (232). The two women see their job as to gather names for McCorkle, to give him back a country. "We are the roots," says Tina, "these poems are the flowers" (232). Metaphors aside, the function of naming is profound. McCorkle was the rough antipodean voice silenced, and now a new country is being formed in the language of names.

"To say that the poet had attempted to create a country may sound simply glib," remarks Sarah, "until you understand that this is exactly what he has done, and so deeply, and in such breadth

that he sends you, as Pound will, back to the library of Babel, deep into the histories and theologies and dictionaries..." (235). This reference to Pound implicates the modernism within which McCorkle was born. But it is a different modernism, one that creates a country out of the raw materials of a classical literary language. McCorkle is the sign of transgression, the hoax come to life, the "robber of dead men's dream" creating a new country out of poetry. It is not important at this point that the new country is neither Australia nor Malaysia. It is the newness and the fact that it is created out of language. Literary truth is created anew out of old materials – this is the story of post-colonial literatures.

There is a sting in the tail of this struggle of life and literature. Christopher Chubb is now obliged to care for McCorkle's legacy. On his death bed McCorkle says, "I am easy now... We are one you and I" (256). It is Chubb who becomes the guardian of McCorkle's life – *My Life as A Fake*. "What is it?" asks Chubb when handed the volume. McCorkle's reply: "A human soul." But in death as in life this human soul has done something that was only ever a dream to those Australian writers, from Lawson to Flanagan, who struggled against the dominance of British Literature and British history: it has subsumed and transformed their 'self-serving, snobbish' discourse of truth with the "song of the autodidact, the colonial, the damaged beast of the antipodes." Chubb himself has become the black swan of trespass on alien shores.

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RECONCILING THE ACCOUNTS : THREE WRITERS – JACK DAVIS, JUDITH WRIGHT, A.D. HOPE¹

Bruce Bennett

As we propose new directions for Australian (and New Zealand) studies into the twenty-first century, we must assert that the past matters. The literary past matters especially, since much of the virtual reality that literary texts create can be imagined as a continuous present and be taken with us into different contexts and domains. But the understanding of those images, episodes and ideas will be enhanced by a recognition of their embeddedness in the times and places of their creators' lives and circumstances. Hence the value of literary history and biography. With these considerations in mind, I wish to revisit three Australian writers who died in the first year of the twenty-first century but who lived through much of the twentieth, with a view to considering what legacy they have left us – some of their images, philosophies, outlooks and ideas, what traditions they represent and what challenges they throw before us as we rethink Australian Studies in Australia and in other countries. The three figures I refer to are Jack Davis, Judith Wright and A.D. Hope.

Apart from the accident of their deaths in 2000, why have I chosen these three writers for special consideration? A first reason is that they represent distinct Intellectual, artistic and socio-political traditions which at certain points seem to clash and conflict. A second reason is that each has a distinctive literary voice and presence. Moreover, they have each made major contributions to Australian literary culture from different parts of the country.

At first sight, the writings and statements of Hope, Wright and Davis may seem to place them at loggerheads – as the Europeanist, the New Englander and the West Australian Aboriginal poet and playwright. No one has probed the sources of western civilisation (and its discontents) more quizzically than the first of these authors, A.D. Hope. Thoroughly imbued with classical notions of British and European cultural standards, and supported by his role as Professor of English at the Australian National University, Hope clashed with the environmental and Aboriginal-inspired Jindyworobaks and even ridiculed Patrick White's writing style as sub-literate (while also acknowledging him as a genius). By contrast, Judith Wright's

romanticism, her ultra-green environmental values and her pro-Aboriginal stance took her on a collision course with Hope's value system; the divergence of paths taken seemed to increase with Wright's conscious decision to take an activist's role in public campaigns of various kinds in contradistinction to Hope's preference for a more contemplative approach for the writer. By contrast with Wright's rural, aristocratic upbringing in New England and the 'double tree' of her Australian and British inheritance, and Hope's Eurocentricism, the Aboriginal Jack Davis remained firmly planted in Australia, though conferences and tours of his plays occasionally took him overseas in his later years. His poetry and plays are firmly located in the Western Australia of his upbringing, among indigenous and mixed communities. His writings often take up the cause of Aboriginal Australians against exclusivist notions of European Australian 'civilization', as they address the tragic impact of the dominant immigrant culture over that of indigenous Australians.

The literary work of Hope, Wright and Davis has been brought to the notice of Australians chiefly through the loosely organized but influential institution of Australian literature. A readership of mainly school and university students has often been encouraged to read a tailored selection of texts based on a syllabus (often presented in thematic form) and their teachers' knowledge and understanding. It should be said at the outset that the three writers under consideration have been accepted at the highest levels of the Humanities establishment in Australia: all three were invited Honorary Fellows of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. However, I also note that reference to the more established figures of Hope and Wright occurs at three times the rate of Davis in the *Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998)² – for which I take responsibility, along with Jennifer Strauss. I note also that national monuments such as the Writers Walk at Circular Quay in Sydney contains plaques for Hope and Wright but not for Davis.

With some of these factors in mind, I will reverse the usual order of literary seniority and consider Jack Davis's contribution to Australian literature and society first. But before that, I should perhaps admit that I knew each of these writers a little—Jack through the Black Swan Theatre Company in Perth, Judith through dancing with her in Armidale and Alec through university lectures in Perth, and driving dangerously with him after a long lunch in Canberra. I suspect that these occasions were more momentous for me than

for these three, though Judith, in her Spanish shawl, may have been as disappointed as I was to miss out on the Frank Moorhouse medal for ballroom dancing. She moved with flair, despite her deafness to the music, and to my conversation.

In the 1980s and early 90s, I remember Jack Davis as a striking figure with a shock of white hair and blue eyes. Born in Perth in 1917, he was the fourth of eleven children to Aboriginal parents who originally came from the North-West of Australia. On his mother's side, there was a descent from the nineteenth century Afghan community which ran camel transport in the Western desert. Jack wrote that his grandfather on his father's side was a Sikh whose family name was Bung Singh, but his father 'Australianised' himself by adopting the name of a white squatter (Davis) and was simply known as Bill.³ Both of Jack Davis's parents were taken from their tribal families and brought up by white families until they were fourteen or fifteen. His mother remembered being taken from her mother when she was seven and given by the police to a pioneer family in Broome, where she worked as a servant.

When Jack Davis was less than a year old, he travelled to the South-West of Western Australia with his family, where his father was appointed foreman of a timber mill at Yarloop. Jack went to school at Yarloop. This 'bush childhood', and the period after he left school from age fifteen to seventeen were happy times, as Keith Chesson's biography demonstrates, and as Davis reveals in poems such as 'The Children' and 'Retrospect' in *The First-born and Other Poems* (1970)⁴. The view is confirmed in his interview with Richard Beilby.⁵

After primary school and before his son started working for a living, Bill Davis arranged with the Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, for the boy to go to the Moore River Native Settlement to learn trade and other skills. Davis recreates scenes from that period in his plays *Kullark* (Home)⁶ and *No Sugar*.⁷ He also set a trend in characterising Neville as an authoritarian representative of white attitudes and values of his time. The characterisation of Neville has been made possible partly because of the written documents he left which, like those of George Augustus Robinson a century earlier in Tasmania, enabled novelists such as Robert Drewe in *The Savage Crows* (1976) and Mudrooroo in *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) to similarly

characterise Robinson as a representative figure of his times—a figure both threatening and ridiculous in hindsight. Social historians and the novelist, Kim Scott, in his Miles Franklin Award-winning novel *Benang* (1999) have given their own interpretations of Neville and his times. In an ABC interview, Scott described Neville as an emblematic figure of the 1920s and 30s.⁸ Neville believed in the social Darwinist notion of survival of the fittest, that ‘full blood’ Aborigines would die out and that he could best ‘protect’ the ‘half-castes’ and other part-Aborigines by assisting that process. Thus Aboriginal women were sent out from the missions into ‘service’ and would often become pregnant to white men, contributing to the ‘breeding out’ of the Aboriginal race. This is the kind of assimilationism against which Judith Wright and others protested. Kim Scott, with his traces of Nyungah ancestry, wrote, in Jack Davis’s wake, his novel of dispossession and hopelessness, *Benang*, as a partial response to these historical events and as a way of articulating his sense of self. Sally Morgan’s autobiographical *My Place* (1987) also emerges from these historical conditions. In the hands of such writers, literature becomes a means of self-discovery, truth-telling and protest against prevailing attitudes and values of the dominant culture. Davis and his successors knew they were writing principally for the dominant white culture and it was their values which were to be challenged and changed by such writing.

In a typical attempt to balance the accounts, Jack Davis recorded the positive as well as the negative aspects of the Moore River Native Settlement and the mission stations in various parts of Australia. He readily concedes that the missions were where many Aboriginal children learnt literacy skills: ‘At least on these missions and settlements’, Davis wrote, ‘some of our people learned to read and write in English. Outside these institutions it was considered improper for Aboriginal children to attend school. They thrust pencils and paper before us to write, and write we did’.⁹ Reading and writing became a solace and a strength for Davis, as it did for short story writer Herb Wharton on the other side of the continent in Queensland. Another blessing of the Moore River Interlude for Davis was the opportunity to meet others of Aboriginal descent from whom his upbringing had largely excluded him. A ‘full-blood’ Aborigine from the North-West, Warru, fascinated him. Davis learnt a new vocabulary of Bibbulmun words and phrases from Warru, went hunting in the bush with him, listened to his songs and wrote them down.¹⁰ The

imaginative adolescent became emotionally engaged with indigenous people to whom he began to feel connected. Many years later, Davis met Warru in the city, Perth. The older man was alcoholic, blind, picking up cigarette butts in the street. A little later, Warru was found dead in Wellington Square. The figure of this man, who came from the same area in the North-West as Davis's father, has an emblematic presence in Davis's plays and verse.

Jack Davis himself is a kind of father-figure of the revival of Black Australian writing since the 1970s, as Kath Walker, or Oodgeroo, is the mother-figure. (Davis probably shares this role with the also recently deceased Kevin Gilbert, a more polemical writer than Davis. David Unaipon, whose face appears on the Australian \$50 note, is perhaps the grandfather figure). One of the noticeable characteristics of Davis's plays, prose and verse is its powerful sense of place. I have mentioned his bush childhood in the hardwood forests of the South-West, but the vast spaces of the North also captured his imagination. He had no trouble dealing with the isolation. Working on an out-camp on a cattle station for two years, Davis says he saw the Boss 'about eight or nine times'. His sense of humour is evident in his remark that, having no calendar he missed Christmas Day, arriving back at the station on the 26th December, when 'most of the fun was over'. 'But that was nothing', he adds, 'It was the country I liked':

This place where I was, was break-away country, the valley floor was down about three to four hundred feet; and the hills, which were sheer, were all around me. It was really beautiful country, stark, the green of Spinifex; and when it did rain, which was seldom, the grass would green up very quickly, flowers would come out, live perhaps three or four days and then die. I used to feel that that particular piece of country was my own and there was many and many a piece of verse which I wrote and which I unfortunately lost or destroyed myself.¹¹

But he was not in total isolation in this landscape, for, as he puts it, 'sometimes the tribes came through'. On one occasion, some 450 Aboriginal men, women and children camp nearby on their annual 'pingai', or walkabout, and Jack shot a scrub bull for them. He remembers the scene idyllically:

...the pool down the bottom of the hill with the gum-trees around it, their moving around in the moonlight, the windmill behind them where they could get water if they wanted it, although they had the creek, small fires dotted over the hill itself—a small hillside where they camped—you could hear them talking their own language and now and then there'd be a burst of laughter.¹²

The observer stands apart, but he identifies with the land and people who inhabit it.

Davis felt a sense of camaraderie with the other black stockmen with whom he worked in the North. His poem 'Aboriginal Stockmen', in his first book of poems *The First-Born* (1970), expresses a sense of mateship with these tough but light-hearted men who kept control of the cattle and kept their dreams to themselves. But many poems deal with the difficult lives of indigenous people and the injustice and suffering wrought upon them by white Australians. The poem 'Family', for instance, was evoked by 'the sentencing of two Aborigines to three months gaol for leaving a country reserve without permission'¹³ at a time when curfews were imposed. This poem leads forward to the *John Pat and Other Poems* volume (1988), with its poems of protest against wrongly imprisoned Aborigines and their brutal treatment. The title poem, with its haunting refrain about the death of a young Aboriginal man in the Roeboorne police cells in 1983, was set to music by Archie Roach. The first stanza gives a good introduction to the poem's lapidary power:

Write of life
the pious said
forget the past
the past is dead.
But all I see
in front of me
is a concrete floor a cell door
and John Pat.

One of the least remarked aspects of Jack Davis's outlook is his Christianity. During the Second World War, Davis returned to the South-West and joined the Brookton Aboriginal Church, taught

In the Sunday School there and considered entering the ministry.¹⁴ He continued this interest with the Aboriginal Church in Perth which was then affiliated with the Aboriginal Advancement Council. He became manager of its community centre and President of the AAC. The expression of a Christian outlook in Davis's writing is typically practical and ethical and without any sentimental religiosity. This applies, too, to his concern for environmental issues, which derives, clearly enough, from his experience of subsistence living in the bush during the Depression years, when white and black alike struggled for a living.

It is an interesting aspect of Jack Davis's life-experience that he found a proper equilibrium in race relations not during a period of economic prosperity in Australia but during the Depression of the 1930s—the happiest time in his life. According to Davis's account, Aboriginal people then had a temporary advantage in that they could hunt and eat well in the bush while men in the cities were out of work.

Jack Davis's temperament and outlook led him towards building bridges of understanding between black and white Australians. Betty Meehan and Rhys Jones have summed up the importance for Davis of moves towards reconciliation and his active involvement in them:

Despite the trials of his life, Davis held no bitterness and was strongly supportive of non-Aboriginal peoples' involvement in the political and artistic issues of reconciliation. With failing health due to diabetes and heart problems, he still remained an activist, protesting against the clear felling of old forests in the south-west and against Western Australia's laws of mandatory sentencing.¹⁵

Davis's legacy to Australian Studies in the twenty-first century, then, is a close-to-the-earth outlook, a concern for the underdog and reminders in his writing of a humorous and at times theatrical personality who sometimes acted in his own plays. His work in education and protest movements from the 1970s, especially, showed a faith in the advancement of both Aboriginal and white Australians towards an ideal of active communication across barriers of class and race.

Judith Wright's early life as the daughter of a New England squatter was a radically different rural beginning from Jack Davis's struggling working-class upbringing in Western Australia. The dynamics of Wright's later sense of guilt and deprivation in being prevented as a child from playing or conversing with Aboriginal children is one of the interesting aspects of her life. (Here, as elsewhere, Veronica Brady's excellent, sympathetic biography of Judith Wright is a reliable guide.¹⁶) Wright's feeling for landscape, which was enhanced during her later friendship with Kath Walker (or, as she became known from 1988, Oodgeroo Noonuccal) was evident in Wright's first book of poems *The Moving Image* (1946) in her now famous lines from 'South of My Days':

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,
rises that tableland, high delicate outline
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite —¹⁷

Wright's poetry, by which her reputation was made, sets the relative stability of landscape against human crises and dramas, wars and threats of nuclear destruction. But damage to the environment and discrimination against Aborigines, the original owners, increased Wright's sense of the fragility of all human existence. There are both personal and public dimensions to Wright's work. On the one hand, childbirth, lovemaking, the relationship between a daughter and her mother, or philosophical reflections, offer lyrical and epiphanic moments behind which lie the darkness and finality of death, which her own mother's death when Judith was twelve, and the war years, must have increased. Her sense of liberation in land and seascapes may be directly related to the dark, enclosed rooms of her mother's slow dying in her childhood years.

At a more public level, the materialism, violence and callous disregard of many of Wright's white Australian compatriots led her to some dismal conclusions regarding 'man's inhumanity to man' (and to women, the natural environment and indigenous Australians). And indeed, when push came to shove, as we shall see, Judith Wright criticised her environmental colleagues for taking insufficient account of Aborigines and their uses of the land.

At significant moments in her writing career, Wright put poetry aside to concentrate on polemical treatises on major public issues. While she valued poetry, she did not fetishise it and she had little hesitation in telling people if she thought they were reading her work wrongly. Her well-known criticism of what she considered to be misreadings by teachers and others of her poem 'Bullocky' – that they were mistakenly interpreting it as a celebration of the myth of the heroic pioneer rather than as a poem about a madman—and her withdrawal of the poem from anthologies indicate her serious intention that influential poems should carry the 'right' message, and that she should not be perceived as indulging in white ancestor worship.

I have argued elsewhere that Judith Wright is a moralist with an overarching ecological vision that informs her work.¹⁸ While she fought for local issues she saw that the underlying threat was economic rationalism: merely economic rather than humanistic values would destroy the future of the universe. As an active foundation member and leading figure in the Australian Conservation Foundation she took part in many campaigns, but pre-eminently to save Fraser Island and the Barrier Reef.

The Coral Battleground is a knowledgeable and eloquent reminder of Wright's commitment to the Australian environment:

Not a town but was putting undiluted and untreated sewage into creeks and rivers. Oil slicks from ships' tanks were often reported. The reef was suffering, the illnesses of civilization were already changing it. What chance had we of keeping it as it had been, or even as it is now.¹⁹

Wright did not belong to political parties but she had no hesitation in telling governments of all persuasions that they must improve their act in regard to the environment. She combined passion with solid argument, images with ideas. Wright was a 'green' before the term had any currency, and she helped to form the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland in the early 1960s. By the early 1970s, when Jack Munday's New South Wales Builders' Labourers' Federation's 'green bans' were used to halt destruction of certain buildings and landscapes and popularised the term 'green' in its modern political sense around the world, Wright had long been a battler in the field.²⁰ Her legacy is a wide-ranging vision that conveys thought and feeling with rhetorical flair and precision. Her outlook is

summarised in *The Coral Battleground*: 'It was easy to see that the shibboleths of growth and progress needed a balancing force, if the future was going to be lived in a world fit for humans'.²¹

Judith Wright's commitment to the causes of indigenous Australians recurs throughout her writings but nowhere more forcefully than in expressions of her deep friendship with her 'spirit sister', Kath Walker, or Oodgeroo. In 'Two Dreamtimes', Wright addresses her directly:

Kathy my sister with the torn heart,
I don't know how to thank you
for your dreamtime stories of joy and grief
written on paperbark.²²

In a sense, Kath Walker represents a return of the repressed for Judith, the little girl who was not allowed to play with 'the dark children' who camped on her parents' sheep and cattle property. Veronica Brady refers to Walker (later Oodgeroo) as 'a kind of "touchstone" to whom [Wright] mentally referred ideas and projects and from whom she drew many of these ideas'.²³ Oodgeroo's death in 1993 (not long after Kevin Gilbert died) was an enormous loss and Wright could never return to the 'easy Eden dreamtime' of their conversations.

But she had another soulmate in her public struggles for proper justice for Aboriginal people. This was H.C. (Nugget) Coombs—a man who has been called, with some accuracy, the last of Australia's great public servants. The corporatisation of Australia's public service, with its tendency to narrow the scope of accountability to what a financial accountant could account for, has unfortunately given the term 'public service' a somewhat hollow ring beside the public achievements of Nugget Coombs, whose view of economics was that it concerned not just 'getting and spending' but managing and caring for the earth's resources, physical and human, for the good of all.²⁴ Wright and Coombs became close friends and fought together, with their combined literary and bureaucratic skills, for issues ranging from opposition to the Ranger Uranium mine, to protection to the Barrier Reef and support of indigenous rights. Through all the arguments and debates about treaties, Aboriginal sovereignty and land rights in the 1980s and 90s, Wright supported

and was supported by Coombs, but she also read and corresponded with Aboriginal authors such as Jack Davis and Kevin Gilbert. Publicly and privately, she was on their side. When her conservationist and Aboriginal interests seemed to conflict she made it clear that she stood for the best that could be achieved for Aboriginal Australians. As Tim Bonyhady has pointed out, Wright resigned from the Wildlife Preservation Society in 1991 when it failed to support Aboriginal rights.²⁵

Wright's legacy to twenty-first century Australian Studies will, I think, be felt in several main areas. The first is as a writer. Whatever directions the institution of Australian literature takes, Wright's poetry from *The Moving Image* (1946) to *Phantom Dwelling* (1985) will contribute to a sense of the power of words to shape personal, relational and public lives. Second, her personal witnessing and public support for the conservation of the Australian environment will continue to resound. Third, her example highlights the crucial importance of listening and responding to Aboriginal voices and concerns. There is a fourth area, too, in which she is currently neglected, and that is in gender studies. As Veronica Brady has noted, Wright was 'never a doctrinaire feminist',²⁶ but she joined the Sisters publishing group, was supportive to women writers, and poems such as 'Eve Scolds' and 'Eve Sings' reveal her concern for women who are exploited or oppressed.

As I indicated at the outset, the role of A.D. Hope in this tryptic for new-century Australianists is in some ways the most problematic. Half a century ago, Hope's role would have been the easiest part to describe and justify, for Hope may seem to represent what was once an almost automatic Anglo-Australian recourse to the touchstone of British and European civilisation. In her review of Hope's *Collected Poems* in 1972, Leonie Kramer interestingly observed that Hope was one of the least Australian of Australian poets and in her obituary for Hope twenty-eight years later²⁷ she reminds us that in 'A Letter from Rome'²⁸ – a poem addressed to her – Hope differentiated himself from other Australian poets' alleged preference for 'the packhorse and the sliprail and the spur'. Moreover, in his best-known poem, 'Australia' (1939), Hope reveals 'a persistent scepticism about the value of his country's literary achievements' when he refers to Australia as 'A nation without songs, architecture, history'. Yet as David Brooks observes in his edited collection of essays on Hope, *The Double Looking Glass* (2000), Hope did indeed produce in his

sixties and seventies 'a distinctively Australian body of work that can be seen, under subsequent critical lights, to draw out retrospectively the implicit Australianness of the work that preceded it'.²⁹ A late developer, Hope is a more surprising and more various person and writer than portraits of him sometimes suggest.

Hope did not return reflectively in his poetry to the small highland town of his birth until the late 1970s with his poem 'Beyond Khancoban', in which he wrote:

... I think of the spot
 To which I return, from which long ago I was made,
 Cooma, and wonder whether it made me or not.
 The poem concludes with the resonant stanza:
 Man is made by all that has made the history of man,
 But here the Monaro claims me; I recognise
 Beyond Khancoban the place where a mind began
 Able to offer itself to the galaxies.³⁰

The regional claim for Cooma and the Monaro here is interesting, followed by its expansion into a universal perspective. But Hope's boyhood was spent also in Tasmania, from the age of four to fourteen, before his family moved to Sydney. Perhaps the deepest imprint on him was made by island Tasmania. Kevin Hart has shown convincingly that Hope 'returns again and again to images of islands, places offering poets an ideal community as well as a refuge from increasing incursion of popular and mass cultures'.³¹ I see interesting similarities and differences between Hope and Edwin Thumboo, the Singapore poet-professor, in their uses of island imagery.³² If a Eurocentric outlook sometimes blinded Hope to local pleasures, this is greatly compensated by later poems of pleasurable humour and feeling, such as 'Hay Fever' and 'Country Places'. The coda to the latter poem laments the destruction of trees and water courses in the name of economic development:

Alas! my beautiful, my prosperous, my careless country,
 She destroys herself: the Lord will come too late!

...

Even Sweet Water Creek at Mullengandra,
If I went there now, would it live up to its name?³³

None of this later work however denies Hope's resonant earlier discovery, in his early fifties, of his alliance with Italy, and especially Rome—and through Rome with Western civilization. If Hope was alert to 'the chatter of culture apes' which could be '*called* civilization over there' (in Europe)—as he put it in his early poem, 'Australia' (1939),³⁴ he also realised the significance and power of Western civilisation for Australians—a recognition that has re-emerged in a number of Australian university courses and programs in the new century. Like another protestant sceptic, the Australian born Londoner, Peter Porter, Alec Hope discovered Italy on furlough from Britain, somewhat belatedly. In both cases, these Australian poets were converted by art and history—as another provincial Protestant, George Eliot's Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, had been converted almost a century earlier. Hope expresses the link he feels with this northern hemisphere world, and Italy in particular, in organic, Wordsworthian imagery:

....I sensed some final frontier passed,
Some seed, long dormant, which has stirred and sprouted,
Some link of understanding joined at last ...
Laugh at these intimations if you will;
The days go by and they are with me still.³⁵

At this point, in the late 1950s, Hope is a reluctant Australian, ambivalent as he had shown himself to be in his hedged-about endorsement of Australian literature as a full subject of study at Canberra University College (later the Australian National University) in the mid-1950s. Duty speaks, rather than love. This tone extends to his mention of Australia in 'A Letter from Rome':

And as I walk I think of my own land
To which I must return when this trip's over.
She speaks a language that I understand
And wakes no love that 'moves with the remover'.³⁶

At the same time, the age of heroic Rome has passed, and the poet is aware that he lives in

...the age of plastics and alloys

Which bring combustion engines in their train
 To fill with hideous and inhuman noise
 All your once pleasant cities of the plain.³⁷

Who speaks for Europe now, he asks, in 'this yawp of Babel'? Hope's Rome, which he has entered on Byron's coat-tails (even to using the *ottava rima* verse form) is the Rome of history and the eternal presence of art, as in Vivaldi's music ('Vivaldi, Bird and Angel') or in Casserius's engravings ('On an Engraving by Casserius').³⁸

As a critic as well as a poet with a long view, Hope retained a sceptical and ironic view of Australian artists and their achievements, including his own. Nevertheless he was a great encourager of younger writers. But he was not a barracker. He knew the depth of British and European culture and this outlook contributed to his satiric portrait of a nationalist 'barracker', A.A. Phillips, as the principal dunce of his *Dunciad Minor* (1970).³⁹ This outlook contributed also to his description of Rex Ingamells and the Jindyworobaks as 'the Boy Scout School of Poetry' (in 1942) and his description of elements of Patrick White's prose style as 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge' (1956), while also acknowledging White's genius. Hope the satirist uses his pen as a scythe in such criticism.⁴⁰

Hope's response to, and reception by feminists is interestingly ambivalent. A late poem *Botany Bay, or the Rights of Woman* (from *The Age of Reason*, 1985) quotes Mary Wollstonecroft and presents the Australia of our convict origins as a place of hope rather than of despair for women:

They say one false step's ne'er retrieved. I think
 It is, if folk' are not pushed to the brink.
 That's why I like this land where they can grow
 In ways that let them have a second go

...

A chance at a new life on a new shore
 Was something, certainly, but even more
 Those virtues which the Age of Reason presents:
 Intelligence, enterprise, and common sense!⁴¹

These then are the classical and Australian values which underlie much of Hope's work – intelligence, enterprise and common sense. But such aspirations were pulled hither and yon in the earlier days of his *Sturm und Drang*, both in his verse and prose.

Hope's biographer, Ann McCulloch, has remarked that Hope's views are 'essentially and perhaps inevitably male'. She sees this in the way he subscribes to the Faustian and Don Juan myths, but she also claims that this does not prevent him having 'insight into the way women think and feel'.⁴² Echoing the finding of some previous commentators and critics, McCulloch observes that Hope's poetry is both romantic and classical, expressing men and women in a state of becoming, often desiring transcendence. Hope and Judith Wright were perhaps products of their times in seeing a polarity in men and women and neither seems particularly interested in the 'unisexual' or androgynous options which intrigue the present generation. Yet they *were* different in their ways of perceiving and understanding the world and its people. Fay Zwicky has described Wright as 'metaphysical' and Hope as 'metabiological', by which she meant that Hope 'seems to start with our heads .. to involve biological considerations [and] to consider motives' whereas Wright 'seems more likely to salute the vague concept of 'human nature' in pointing to the continuing and repetition of fundamental human responses'.⁴³

Hope lived for writing. With a touch of his usual exaggeration for rhetorical and epigrammatic effect, he said that 'Living is merely writing at second-hand'.⁴⁴ It is doubtful whether Jack Davis or Judith Wright would have given such precedence to the written word as an art form that precedes and shapes living. Both of them were more aware of, and concerned with, the *effects* of their writing, how they could *effect* changes in society through their writing, though they were also painfully aware of the limitations of the changes they could bring about. This outlook is evident in Wright's focus on the ethics rather than the style of Jack Davis's poetry in her introduction to his second volume of poems, *Jagardoo* (1978):

The dispossessed [Aboriginal] people are increasingly huddled on the fringes of the towns and cities, where they must live despised lives in what Davis calls 'the stench and pitch of poverty ...' Yet the surprising thing about this book is not in its

expression of dispossession and injustice, but in its refusal of any final bitterness and violence ... So the book becomes a plea, rather than a threat; an assertion of humanity rather than a curse or a baring of teeth.⁴⁵

There is no better or more powerful statement than this of Wright's sense (derived in part from her reading of Davis and other indigenous writers) of a shared humanity with Aboriginal people, men and women.

Hope stood for the written word as art. It is in this light that his attack on the Jindyworobaks should be viewed. Hope was offended, above all, by the poor *quality* of the writing by many of the Jindys. Despite his conviction that 'there is a sound core of common sense in the Jindyworobak case' he was offended by, for example, Rex Ingamells' 'versified jownalese' and 'flat-foot verbiage'. On the other hand, he praised Ian Mudie's verse while finding in its expression of patriotism, in 1942, 'traces of the fanaticism of the Hitler Youth Movement'.⁴⁶ Hope's wartime attempts, including here, to reject the kind of nationalistic fervour that kills artistic expression mellowed, as we have seen, under the auspices of a different kind of 'new nationalism' in the 1970s and 80s. But he remained a resistant spirit, and something of an intellectual nomad, most at home in an era of internationalism.

In the international sphere, Hope and Wright have probably had the greatest influence of the three, though Davis's work received significant notice in the 1990s. What kind of influence can a writer like Hope have on Australia and Australianists? I am reminded of academic and writer Yasmine Gooneratne's comment that when she was trying to decide where to emigrate to from her troubled Sri Lanka, she heard that A.D. Hope lived in Australia and thought that Australia must therefore be a civilised country. Writers of Hope's ability and stature can give depth and stability to civilization.

In a new spirit of reconciliation, then, we should give due thanks and praise for a remarkable trio of Australian writers – Davis, Wright and also Hope – who all died in the first year of the new century. Their experience spans the West, East, North and South of the Australian continent. Their literary work, which spans much of the twentieth century, enables us to speak with justifiable pride, in international forums and publications, of outstanding cultural achievements which enable a wider world to understand better the civilisation, problems and way of life of Australians.

Reference :

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³ Keith Chesson, *Jack Davis: A Life*, Melbourne, Dent, 1988, pp 5-8.

⁴ Jack Davis, *The First-Born and Other Poems*, Knoxfield, Victoria, Dent, 1986 edition.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp v-xi.

⁶ Jack Davis, *Kullark (Home)/The Dreamers*, Sydney, Currency, 1982.

⁷ Jack Davis, *No Sugar*, Sydney, Currency, 1986.

⁸ Kim Scott, interviewed by Margaret Throsby, ABC Radio, 16 May 2001.

⁹ Jack Davis, 'Aboriginal Writing : A Personal View', in Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (eds), *Aboriginal Writing Today*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985, pp 11-19.

¹⁰ *The First-born and Other Poems*, pp xi-xii.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p xiii.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p 33.

¹⁴ See Betty Meehan and Rhys Jones, 'Jack Leonard Davis', in Bruce Bennett (ed.) *Proceedings 2000*, Canberra, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2001,

pp 64-67.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p 66.

¹⁶ Veronica Brady, *South of My Days : A Biography of Judith Wright*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1998, p 133.

¹⁷ Judith Wright, *Collected Poems 1942-1970*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1971, p 20.

¹⁸ See Bruce Bennett, 'Judith Wright : An Ecological Vision', in Robert L. Ross (ed.), *International Literature in English : Essays on the Major Writers*, New York: Garland, 1991, pp 205-21.

¹⁹ Judith Wright, *The Coral Battleground*, p 104.

²⁰ See Bob Brown, *The Greens*, with Peter Singer , Melbourne, Text, 1996, p 64.

²¹ *The Coral Battleground*, op cit, p 3.

²² Judith Wright, *Alive: Poems 1971-72*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1973, p 22.

²³ *South of My Days*, op cit, p 308.

²⁴ See Tim Rowse, *Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life*, Port Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

²⁵ Tim Bonihady, *Places Worth Keeping: Conservationists, Politics and Law*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1993, p 134.

²⁶ *South of My Days*, op cit, pp 396-97.

²⁷ Leonie J. Kramer, 'Alec Derwent Hope (1907-2000)', in *Proceedings 2000*, op cit, pp 68-72.

²⁸ See A.D. Hope, *Selected Poems*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1992, pp 87-106.

²⁹ David Brooks (ed.), *The Double Looking Glass: New and Classic Essays on the Poetry of A.D. Hope*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland press, p 9.

³⁰ *Selected Poems*, op cit, pp 183-84.

³¹ Kevin Hart, *A.D. Hope*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1992, p 47.

³² See Bruce Bennett, 'Edwin Thumboo and A.D. Hope: Island Men and their Communities', in Tong Chee Kiong et al (eds), *Ariels: Departures and Returns, Essays for Edwin Thumboo*, Singapore, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp 89-101.

³³ *Selected Poems*, pp 71-72.

³⁴ *ibid*, p 103.

³⁵ *ibid*, pp 103-04.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*, p 105.

³⁸ A.D. Hope, *Collected Poems*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1972, pp 263-278, 222-226.

³⁹ A.D. Hope, *Dunciad Minor*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1970.

⁴⁰ See A.D. Hope, *Native Companions: Essays and Comments on Australian Literature 1936-1966*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1974.

⁴¹ A.D. Hope, *The Age of Reason*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1985, pp 135-36.

⁴² *Proceedings 2000*, op cit, p 70.

⁴³ Fay Zwicky, 'Another Side of Paradise: A.D. Hope and Judith Wright', *The Double Looking Glass*, op cit, p 227.

⁴⁴ *Proceedings 2000*, op cit, p 70.

⁴⁵ Judith Wright, Foreword to Jack Davis, *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia*, Sydney, Methuen, 1978, pp viii-ix

⁴⁶ *The Double Looking Glass*, op cit, pp 202-205

Australia After All? Mary Gilmore's Re-location of the Visionary Just Community.

Jennifer Strauss

*'Homeless I go, who ever longed for home'*¹

*'The law of life is movement'*²

In 1896 a thirty-one year old schoolteacher, political activist, minor journalist and versifier left Sydney for Paraguay. Mary Jean Cameron was practising what she had been preaching in *New Australia*, the journal of the New Australia Co-operative Settlement Association; she was joining those members of the Association striving to establish a socialist utopia, a 'New Australia' true to the ideals of radical egalitarianism betrayed by the Australia of the early 1890s. In 1902 she was to return as Mary Gilmore, a wife and mother and an unreconstructed Idealist who could assert in 1939 that the New Australia movement had only apparently ended in Paraguay because its influence 'never quite died out in Australia. It educated even its opponents.'³

Certainly Gilmore remained a persistent public advocate of the principles she saw as being at the heart of William Lane's⁴ radical-mystical version of Communism as 'Communalism'. It was the way in which Lane's ideas were realised that progressively disappointed her at Cosme, the settlement established by Lane and his true believers after differences of opinion had split the first colony of Nova Australis. From initial assurances to Henry Lawson that 'Communism as we have it (my italics) is alright' [*Letters* 4], Mary moved to the reservation that 'Collectivism or Communism' was inadequate as a full pattern for existence because it can have nothing to do with moral and spiritual matters, being able to relate only to those material things which 'are usually monopolized by the few to the hurt of the many' [*Letters* 6]. And although she never voiced a reaction as extreme as Larry Petrie's 'whips of dogma, stacks of selfishness, yards of words and absolutely no Liberty' [CG 66], similar criticisms are implicit in the verdict she passed just before leaving Cosme:

I have come to the conclusion that Communism is a failure – is not attainable, real Communism that is, and enforced

Communism is worse than none. I think that all co-operation with equal sharing is the truest and most possible – gives most good with fewest ill-results. [*Letters* 12]

She touches here on two of the essential principles that had attracted her to Lane's thought and were not invalidated for her by Cosme's failure of *praxis*: that there was a need in government for systemic regulation of material inequities and that government should be a matter of voluntary and highly participatory association by the governed. The first of these not always congruous positions can be seen in her somewhat minimalist 1908 definition of Socialism:

What Socialism is after is the abolition of people having nothing . . . that there shall be a limit below which none shall fall; that man, woman and child shall have, as the result of their labor, enough, at least, to live on. [*CG* 168]

It is the principle of full community participation in government that she presents retrospectively as *the* most important of the ideas of the New Australia movement. In words that would certainly have startled any hypothetical American readers once the Cold War had set in, she says of the proto-Communist colony:

Abraham Lincoln...gave us the ideal by which we hoped to live as an abiding community, and that was 'Government of the people by the people for the people". But we were ahead of our time. [*Letters* 163]

As early as 1904, Gilmore had suggested that Cosme's failure had been a matter of mistiming, as well as of excessive dependence on its charismatic leader [*CG* 107]. Her 1939 statement suggests that the place was wrong as well as the time. Her initial diagnosis is materialist: the colony had too few inhabitants and too little capital for the success of its agrarian enterprises. Her next paragraph, however, moves into the realm of social psychology, noting how geographic isolation intensified the effects of ideological peculiarity:

There was no other similar place with which we could have reciprocity or exchange. So, when the human cry came for that change of scene, the desire for new faces, for the need of food that we could not supply, or even for another kind of girl for a man to marry (for not all is affinity that is adjacent) when, I say, these things happened, and natural frictions

aggravated them, there was no similar colony to go to. There was only the alien world, which was still by custom the familiar world. And so the drift away began. [*Letters* 163]

But Mary Gilmore was no drifter, and the familiar world might after all be amenable to change. Much of her future life – as journalist, social campaigner, poet and persistent advocate of Australian literature – was to be devoted to making the New Australia happen at home rather than abroad. And while there are various ways in which one might examine the threads of intention, impediment and inconsistency that twine through her public and private pursuit of the just community, I propose to consider how they become visible during the key changes of location from Australia to Paraguay and back, and from Casterton to Sydney.

TO THE NEW AUSTRALIA

It is an historical truism that Australian society entered the 1890s in a troubled condition: economic depression brought widespread social misery, whether to the 'endless rows of mortgaged cottages and crowded apartment houses' of Sydney's 'hateful back streets' or to the huts of struggling selectors, the tents of diggers, or the shearing sheds of the 'great West'.⁵ With unemployment ensuring a pool of cheap labour, power struggles were all too likely between Capitalism and Unionism, each of which had been developing industrial muscle during the preceding economic expansion.

As the successive union strikes of the early nineties failed, socialists of the genus of William Lane saw more than mere setbacks to the objective of ensuring decent wages and conditions for workers; they saw symptoms of 'a corrupt and dying civilization', one 'insufficient to cope'. These phrases from early numbers of *New Australia* represent the consistent opinion of the Association:⁶ Australia was proving incapable of the political imagination and moral fibre that could resolve the present crisis and prevent its repetition by re-establishing the broken covenant of migration. Under that covenant, those coming to fill colonial 'empty spaces' accepted dislocation from the familiar for the promise of a new life based on access to land, labour and social equality.

The imagery and orientation of this emigrant vision was persistently rural, and it is out of Australia's bush that Mary Jean Cameron emerges. Born in 1865 near Goulburn, her heritage was Celtic, but Protestant: her Cameron father was born before his parents migrated from Scotland to Australia in 1839, her mother after the arrival of the fiercely Wesleyan Hugh Beattie and his wife in 1842. In this emigrant society, place was of enormous psychological importance; it could not be taken for granted, and for the socially conscious like Mary's family, homesickness for the place of origin had often to be consciously countered by commitment to the new place as the potential site of a better society.

Although there are some early celebrations of the city as the site for a new *polis*, it is not surprising that the bush should have become the symbolic place of the nation, given a long cultural tradition of the ideal place as pastoral: Arcadia, unfallen Eden. Nonetheless, the endemic tension between aspiration and reality was exacerbated in Australia by the particular unpredictability and harshness of rural life, so that images of the land as an Edenic garden conflicted with representations of it as manifesting the curse obliging earth's postlapsarian inhabitants to bring forth bread in the sweat of their brow.

One resolution of such tensions was to shift emphasis to the moral qualities of bush life as representing a kind of age of innocence. Mary Jean Cameron was responsive to such a position and it was to linger in Mary Gilmore's later volumes of bush recollections, even while she increasingly registered the violence done to Aborigines by the settlers' land-taking, or the misogyny that spoke its depreciation of women openly from the pulpit ('When Butter was Sixpence a Pound') or covertly in the rejection of those with unwomanly talents. ('Then She Turned and Rode Away').⁷

She began life as a delicate child, studious despite the sporadic schooling resulting from her father's itinerant pursuit of work. The auto-didacticism common in bush culture is exhibited in her frenetically eclectic reading as a youthful Student Teacher at Wagga Wagga [*Letters* 16]. Her teaching career also gave her other experiences, taking her to various bush locations, the remote mining town of Silverton, and finally, in 1890, to Sydney. It allowed her firsthand observation of the lives of the shearers, miners and maritime workers whose cause she espoused as the series of industrial confrontations developed.

In the bitter violence of the strikes as much as in their industrial defeat, many socialists perceived the destruction of the very bases of the cherished vision of an egalitarian rural society. The Bush might remain the centre of Australian productivity, but the City had become the centre of economic power and privilege. In his 1891 poem 'Where the Dead Men Lie', Barcroft Boake, whom Mary had known as a visitor to the Cameron household [*Letters* 296], voiced a common anger against 'Moneygrub', the absentee landlord sipping his claret at the Sydney Club while the workers on his property lived hard and died in poverty and loneliness. In 1925, Mary was to write of the disappearance of the pioneering small farmers from the area where she had been born:

The fruits of 'Nationalism' – of sheep and acres instead of men and homes – no matter what its name in its day – stood condemned; and the cry of Labour – of the land for the people – was justified by every blank space out of which an old face should have looked. [*CG* 237]

What Lane offered in the 1890s was another chance to realise that cry, 'the land for the people'. His vision was quintessentially religious: 'Communism,' he declared, 'is part of God's law' [*CG* 115]. It was also distinctly moralistic: the New Australia Constitution forbade gambling, drinking and sexual licence. Monogamy was to be the rule and prohibition of sexual crossing of 'the Colour line' was absolutely fundamental [*Letters* 156]. These puritanical proscriptions proved unacceptable to some colonists, but not to Mary, steeled by her Calvinist background. She was later to attack both gambling and drinking on the *Worker's Women's Page*, and although sympathetic to the problems of unmarried mothers and prostitutes, she always insisted on the binding nature of the marriage contract and sexual 'purity'. Her sense of the latter seems never to have been completely detached from early pseudo-scientific and racist notions of eugenics which saw the transmission of 'clean blood' as an essential function of sexual purity, a function subverted by the sexual evil of miscegenation.

It was no point of principle that prevented Mary from joining the first colonists. Ironically enough, given Lane's generally strong position on women's rights, this energetic and valued advocate and organiser was excluded by her femaleness, ineligible as a single woman to sail with the first settlers. In the light of the difficulties

experienced in maintaining restrictions on drinking and gambling, Lane was probably pragmatically correct in deciding that romantic complications would be too disruptive to the initial stages of his undertaking. But the restriction fell on single women rather than single men. The exception was the trained nurse needed to attend to the colonists' health. Several years later, Mary too could be summoned to Cosme, her value as a schoolteacher apparently outweighing the risk of her disruptively single condition. And, since Mrs Lane was at that time actively seeking suitable single women to join the colony, it was probably expected that Mary would marry anyway. Logically, it would have been hard for her to resist the arguments she herself had propounded so emphatically:

We hold a man's life incomplete unless he has taken a woman to his heart and enthroned her in a home round which is built the impregnable wall of marriage. We hold that a woman has lived vainly, and without the crowning joy of living, unless from among manly men she has chosen in free will a husband upon whom, in all purity and virtue, she can pour out the passionate affection that is in all true women's hearts...We hold that the Mother-woman is the highest and best of all.⁸

It is difficult to disagree with Wilde's argument that the combination of her own wishes with Cosme's ethos and circumstances made it almost inevitable that Mary would marry. Difficult also to disagree with his proposition that, except in Cosme, 'it is highly unlikely that she would have married William Gilmore, shearer-cum-farmer, with little or no formal education and only a marginal desire to share the obsessions of *her* nature' [CG 100].

Marry him, however, she did. And there is considerable testimony to the strength of their feeling for each other in their letters. These suggest that Mary went at being wife, then mother, with characteristic energy; but one may also surmise that this immersion in private domesticity acted at first as a protection against her growing doubts about Cosme as the place for her. Not only did its 'generally infernal' climate affect her health but fever was a constant threat to her child, perhaps a reminder of the family history that had seen her grandfather's oldest son and first wife die of fever within months of their emigration to Australia. More worrying still was her perception that Cosme offered an environment not only restricted but morally perilous:

We can hardly go to . . . worse moral surroundings, bad children for the boy to grow up with, a constant straining to individualism, the native girl outside, and the cana [rum] almost for the asking. [*Letters* 5]

For someone as obsessed by contracts as Mary, the contract to be a wife and mother, initially in harmony with that undertaken as a colonist, now became a conflicting priority, a justification for abandoning the earlier commitment. The scales may well have been tipped by Lane's departure in 1899. Ten days later, the Gilmores resigned, probably not realising that almost three years of intermittent separation and hard work would elapse before they were once again in old Australia, where conflicts between the duties of private and public life would find a new setting.

CASTERTON: KEEPING SANE IN THE BLACK SCRUBS OF WESTERN VICTORIA [*Letters* 292]

In Paraguay, Mary had nostalgically constructed a scenario of the family's virtuous Australian rural life in 'two slab rooms with a bark roof and an earth floor':

. . . we'll be pinched and doleful, and cold rain will be awful, but we'll eat hearty and sit by the fire o' nights and talk and think about the people over here gone to bed early to get away from the mosquitoes...And we'll look at our red-faced boy and think of the yellow-faced children of the Colony, growing more and more like the native under the strain of fever and heat. [*Letters* 5]

What she could not foresee were Will's frequent absences in search of work and her own increasing hunger for 'educated conversation or discussion' as she and Billy remained with Will's parents on their struggling farm in 'the black scrublands of Western Victoria' [*Letters* 24]. It was not that the place, for all its hardships, did not offer material to the writer in its moments of natural beauty and its storehouse of tales of pioneering days; but she doubted her own capacity:

I would give anything – except duty – to possess the power of putting things as I hear them, but I don't seem to have that faculty. I can write *about* them, but I can't write *them*. Lawson

or Davis would find stuff down here for the next forty years – & all history – real living, authentic & passing away with every year that goes. [*Letters* 31]

Nor did she see how her environment was going to stimulate that expressive faculty:

The people among whom I live have all the individuality and robustness of the country, and in my own household, or rather my father-in-law's – of large and strong brain power, bitter humour and sharp shrewd tongue, but lingual and thought education is lacking. This, not so much for the making & waking of idea (sic), as for readiness of use in language. [*Letters* 24]

Mary had, nonetheless, found someone to supply educated conversation. This was A. G. Stephens, editor of the Red Page of *The Bulletin* and later editor of *The Bookfellow*, which used to come to her, declared Mary, 'like a light in prison' . . . 'but for [Stephens's] kindness in sending me books . . . and an occasional letter of cheer . . . I wd. have completely broken down when I was in the bush' [*Letters* 52]. And yet sometimes Stephens must have seemed like the tempter within Mary's fortress of domestic duties – for in publishing her poems on the Red Page and urging her to write more, he was re-awakening literary ambitions never quite abandoned, despite her indignant (and uncomfortably prescient) denial to Will that these had influenced the decision to leave Cosme:

I wouldn't be a writer in case I should let the love of it grow into my life and perhaps owe to it what I only want to owe to you – or that it might set up another aim or tie in which you would not be the centre. [*Letters* 9]

Her letters to Stephens show a gradual attenuation of determination to give priority to her contract as wife and mother over seductive 'dreams of writing'. While a book 'great for all ages' might justify yielding to those dreams, she has realistic doubts of meeting such a standard [*Letters* 27-8]. And even as a modestly serious writer she fears she would be 'given over body and soul to the work . . . Under the circumstances of my life it is better I should be a good housekeeper & home-keeper & maker.' She adds ambiguously 'If I can' [*Letters* 30].

The doubt was well-founded. Even before Bernard O'Dowd had persuaded the Melbourne publisher George Robertson to

accept her first collection of poems, she had begun, in 1908, her twenty three year stint of writing and editing the Women's Page of the *Worker* – a project she herself suggested to its editor.

She had discovered the means to justify both her hunger to write and her sense of duty. While her family benefited from the much-needed money her writing brought in, the project of the Women's Page offered an opportunity to extend family obligations into public life. By educating Australia's women for socialism, she would make Australia a better place for women and children, and hence ultimately for men as well. Her teacherly role had won her a place in the effort to form the New Australia; she would reclaim it on a wider scale for the long haul of re-forming the original nation.

Sharyn Pearce's essay on Mary Gilmore and the Women's Page, perceptively titled 'Propagating the Word', rightly identifies Mary's didacticism as one of the well-springs of her project. In Mary, that characteristic's potential for bossiness was tempered by respect for knowledge as something to be shared as well as acquired, and by a degree of genuine humility about the extent of her own. She had written to Stephens: 'It has seemed to me that what I want most of all is knowledge. And in this I typify Australia' [*Letters* 33]. She did, however, have a new form of knowledge to add to the spinsterly authority of the teacher: she knew about motherhood. And that knowledge gave her a special chance to reach out from her bush isolation to an audience of working-class women, preaching 'not to the converted, but to the convertible; not to the so-called "new woman", single and independent in the work place, but in most cases to the woman tied to home, hearth and children.'⁹

In writing for such an audience, moreover, Gilmore had an opportunity to shape her writing in accordance with gender notions of character and behaviour that she accepted as essentially true rather than merely socially produced. Ruth Park has recently recorded that, when she and other young wives attributed male self-centredness to a misunderstanding of woman's identity,

Mary Gilmore said it was little to do with misunderstanding of a woman's identity . . . 'No, it's a radical misunderstanding of *human* identity. We have to confront the fact that, always speaking generally, few men are good with people of any

gender. Read history and see for yourself. Objects, events, movements – those are the male forte, never the welfare of human beings, *en masse* or individually.’¹⁰

Essentialism and pro-maternalism shaped much of Gilmore’s feminist discourse throughout her life, above all in her Women’s Page. These positions marked her off from some feminists of her own day; they may even illuminate W.H. Wilde’s puzzlement over a certain hesitancy in the response of later day feminists to Gilmore [See *CG* 10]. What the literary critic is likely to observe, however, is that they provided her with the basis for an aesthetic of difference which would validate as womanly writing both the Women’s Page and the modest ‘verse’ which she proposed to claim as hers rather than the Olympian (masculine?) heights of ‘poetry’ [See *Letters* 138]. That this did not assume a simple hierarchy of literary worth is clear enough in her praise of Nettie Palmer’s book of criticism, *Talking It Over*:

a book that is all alive, not some darned Professor talking slow, but a woman’s quick mind flying from point to point, with a thousand wings fluttering at a time, and picking up that, this because it shines, that because it can *be* shined, and putting it all into the fit and living words that such things deserve and so seldom get. [*Letters* 97]

It was, however, an aesthetic which could create problems for a woman writer in a patriarchal culture when, for all her genuine modesty, she had a healthy share of ego, of which she remarked wryly in later life ‘Ego is a great thing to make the world go round, but it is a wheel with spikes in most cases’ [*Letters* 130]. In 1911 something – ego, duty, financial need – had Mary once again on the move

SYDNEY: A WRITER’S PLACE

Three years after the first Women’s Page and one year after the publication of *Marri’d and other Verse*, the Casterton household divided: Will went on the land in Queensland, Mary went to Sydney, to write, and initially to oversee the completion of Billy’s education. For some time this was spoken of as a temporary arrangement. In the event the separation was final, and apart from one or two brief visits to Sydney, Will Gilmore lived apart from Mary until his death, in the same year as that of their son, in 1945.

We have no knowledge of Will's feelings about this marriage at a distance, as nothing survives of their regular correspondence and Mary's public references to her marital arrangements were eminently discreet. It is tempting to read the death-throes of a love affair, if not of a formal marriage, in a poem like 'In Life's Sad School'; and yet one must set against this her insistence that Will, then Billy, had the life of their choice and that 'we were separated by distance, but not otherwise' [CG 377]. Her diary entries after both had died insist on the paradox that psychic unity can only be maintained with individual freedom as its basis: 'I could not be a hampering to them. They must be free' [CG 463].

The logic of that argument must have been applied by Mary – to herself: she had to be free to be the kind of writer she wanted to be – and Sydney was the place where that could be put into practice. It is significant that, despite the love poems of *The Passionate Heart* (1918), no breath of sexual scandal touched Mary Gilmore. Apart from friendships, of which she had many with both men and women, her emotions apparently found adequate outlet in the nurturing activities of her literary life, for not only was she propagating the word of socialism, she had taken up a conscious role of fostering Australian literature.

While she never gave up on specific political campaigns, she increasingly argued for literature as the general *formative* influence able to create the kind of Australia she believed in. In terms reminiscent of treatises on the role of the good mother and/or the sound educator, she declared that 'literature makes nations, it shapes their futures and their characters in the shaping of their people's characters' [Letters 369]. The right kind of literary nationalism would mould the just society.

She envisaged her own special contribution to such literary nationalism as being the recuperation of Australia's past in such a way that its people would better understand the present. Her first volume of essays in this recollective mode was *The Hound of the Road* (1922). After this, she claimed, she would venture to call herself a writer, 'for in it I do what I always wanted to do, i. e. give the pioneer (his times and the land), a setting of poetry and natural romance, and so show his right relation to a literature which goes beyond mere chronicle and itemization.' [Letters 70]

The poetry and romance Mary had in mind were not simply idealisation, and in later essays it became increasingly clear that while she wanted the pioneers valued, she also wanted acknowledgment of the dark side of their times and achievements. She was particularly vehement to Hugh McCrae after *More Recollections* (1935):

When all that stuff used to be written, during & after the war about Australia's virgin page I used to stand in wonder. Not two hundred years old & our first hundred years saw the Convict System, the destruction of at least half a million blacks, and in the '80s the thousands of dead black-birded kanaka 'slaves' – and after that the war. A virgin page! The 'cat' alone marked it. [*Letters* 120]

Gilmore's championing of the cause of Australia's Aborigines represents a triumph of instinctive sympathy for the oppressed over the systemic racism that she, like many other radicals of her time (Lane, Lawson, Miles Franklin), had taken on board with the eugenics of the late nineteenth century. In the 1920s there were other writers bringing the situation of the Aborigines into the arena of public discussion; the doyen of them all, Catherine Langloh Parker, was possibly a more immediate influence on Mary's new cause than the role-modelling that she attributed to her father and maternal grandfather as examples of the better-behaved type of pioneer. Nonetheless, Gilmore's ventures into popular journalism on this issue *were* innovative – and it is perhaps too easy to depreciate the originality of such a change of attitude in someone entering their sixties. What is even more likely is that modern readers will react negatively (as some did even in her own time) to elements of patronising romanticism in her overall tendency to emphasise the *pastness* of these people and, by implication, of the victimisation, especially in the poems of *The Wild Swan* (1930) and *Under the Wilgas* (1932).¹¹ And yet a poem like 'The Myall in Prison' retains an uncomfortable relevance to this day, and her prose writing often insisted that contemporary Australian society was impoverishing itself by refusing to learn from Aboriginal culture.

It must also be remembered that most of Gilmore's writing on Aboriginal issues takes place within the context of her general project of writing the past. As such, it accommodates her radical persona even as she demonstrates that she is, at one level,

Australia's dutiful daughter, carrying out the womanly task of preserving family mementoes. Offered as reminiscences or recollections, her essays could enter the literary arena with formal modesty, even when intending to give 'the boasting Anglo-Saxon one on the nose' [Letters 120].

It is ironic that it was only the city that could provide the material conditions that allowed Gilmore to write a bush life distanced in space as well as time. For she never lived in the bush again, apart from a four year retreat to semi-rural Goulburn (1921-1925). She went there with health problems, probably precipitated by hard work, poor living conditions, anxiety about tensions in her relationship with a new editorial regime at the *Worker*, and the long anguish of World War One, during which the conscription issue had brought her pacifism and patriotism into conflict. She spent time under the care of the Sisters of Mercy at the Hospital of St John of God and underwent something of a religious experience, recorded in the poems of *The Rue Tree*. If indeed this was 'a religious renewal that brought with it much greater peace and serenity than she had hitherto known' [CG277], it also restored her to worldliness: by 1925 she was ready again for Sydney.

For it was in Sydney that she could practise another special role she saw for herself – as foster mother to Australian literature. Apart from involvements with public bodies and writers' organisations such as the Fellowship of Australian Writers, she was indefatigable in reading other writers' manuscripts, networking, organising help for writers in trouble, advising those who were just beginning to make their way. The latter were the 'swans' who validated her claim 'to be mother enough as an Australian writer, to the young' [Letters 112].

From 1933, the melancholy persona of *The Rue Tree* even had a home to which they could come, a flat in King's Cross. There she was to live until her death in 1962, undisturbed that it became an unorthodox location for a Dame of the British Empire, a title awarded to her in 1937. Her biographer, W. H. Wilde, notes that at the time of the 1954 royal visit, the largest of Union Jacks hung on Gilmore's balcony while on her desk sat the latest consignment of 'Arrows', the political paragraphs she had volunteered to write for the Communist *Tribune* after becoming incensed at the treatment

by government and press of the 1952 Youth Peace Carnival. The incongruity would probably not have worried a woman who, approaching ninety, acknowledged motion as a law of life, knew she was alive so long as she had a cause, and had come to believe that, sometimes at least, she had deserved Hugh McCrae's description of her as the authentic 'voice of our country'.

NOTES :

¹ Mary Gilmore, 'I Went with Christ to the Wilderness', *The Rue Tree* (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens, 1930).

² Cited in W.H. Wilde, *Courage a Grace: A Biography of Dame Mary Gilmore* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), p.153. Further references to this source, abbreviated to CG, are contained in the text.

³ *Letters of Mary Gilmore*, selected and edited by W. H. Wilde and T. Inglis Moore (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), pp. 153-163. Further references to this collection, abbreviated to *Letters*, are incorporated into the text.

⁴ William Lane (1861-1927), an Englishman who arrived in Brisbane in 1885, established a radical weekly, the *Boomerang*, in 1887 and was editor of the *Brisbane Worker* from 1890. Disgusted by the imprisonment of the leaders of the failed 1891 Shearers' Strike, he set up the New Australia Association and led the first group of settlers to Paraguay in 1893.

⁵ William Lane, *The Working Man's Paradise*, ed. Michael Wilding (1980), p.62.

⁶ The first phrase is from *The Working Man's Paradise* in the first edition of 1892, the second from Mary's article 'The Why and the Wherefore' in 1893.

⁷ The essays mentioned come from *Old Days: Old Ways, A Book of Recollections* (1934). This was preceded by *The Hound of the Road* (1922) and followed by *More Recollections* (1935).

⁸ *New Australia* Jan. 1894.

⁹ Sharyn Pearce, 'Propagating the Word: Mary Gilmore and the Women's Page'. In Shameless Scribblers, a forthcoming collection of essays on Australian women's journalism.

¹⁰ Ruth Park, *Fishing in the Styx* (Ringwood: Viking/Penguin, 1993), p.123

¹¹ For a recent discussion of the ambivalence in Gilmore's position(s) on aboriginal issues, see Shirley Walker, 'Mary Gilmore: Reconstructing the Past' in *Vanishing Edens* (Townsville: Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, 1992).

Communism and Carnival:

Ralph de Boissiere's *Crown Jewel* and its Australian Context

David Carter

The Australasian Book Society (ABS) was established in Melbourne in 1952 by a small group of left-leaning writers, unionists and literary supporters. It was inspired in part by the success of Frank Hardy's scandalous novel of Labor betrayal, *Power Without Glory*, which in 1950 had been published independently – and printed secretly – outside the commercial publishing networks. Many of those involved were communists but although the ABS came to operate in accord with Communist Party cultural politics it was never simply a Party front nor did it publish only communist writers or communist texts. For the most part it operated under a broader notion of 'progressive', nationalist or democratic literature.¹

The objectives of the ABS were literary, nationalist and left-wing, a triad which would produce spectacular internal conflicts especially in the company's early years. For some, its primary purpose was to publish books with a 'progressive social content' which would be unlikely to find a commercial publisher; and to publish books for worker readers. For others, literary nationalism rather than working-class realism was paramount, the primary purpose of the ABS being to sustain and expand Australian literature which was largely ignored by commercial publishing. Of course the two perspectives converged where the authentic Australian literary tradition was understood to be naturally democratic, realist and vernacular. Literary nationalism, in general, was more prominent than communism in the company's practices and publications.

In this context, one of the intriguing facts in the history of Australian literary nationalism is that the first book published by the ABS was Ralph de Boissiere's 'Trinidadian' novel *Crown Jewel*.² (It was paired, for ABS members, with Frank Hardy's *Journey Into the Future*, a late example of the utopian genre of the writer's journey to the Soviet Union.)³ De Boissiere's novel tells the story of the struggles of Trinidad workers and unemployed against white colonial capitalism in the second half of the 1930s. It was a striking choice for an organisation established to further the publication of Australian

books in the 'progressive', democratic tradition of the national literature then claimed by the left.

As Jack Beasley explains, the first selection panel for the ABS list was 'literary' in its qualifications – Leonard Mann, Alan Marshall and A A Phillips. *Crown Jewel* was selected 'for its rather considerable merits, and also because no suitable manuscript of Australian life was available'. Beasley reports that response to the book was positive and 'did not seem to be affected very much by its being a story of people in a strange, far away land'.⁴ De Boissiere himself was working part-time for the ABS in this period, addressing meetings in suburban homes and at factories in order to build ABS membership. With its membership base, the ABS committed to larger print runs than was usual for commercial publishers, especially for a first novel. Three thousand copies of *Crown Jewel* were printed.

In what ways might we consider *Crown Jewel* an 'Australian novel'? In what ways does its provenance or perspectives mark it out as different within its Australian context? De Boissiere was born in Trinidad in 1907 to a middle-class 'creole' family. He began publishing stories in the late 1920s in the emerging local literary magazines, *Trinidad* and the more famous *Beacon*, associated with C L R James, Albert Gomes and Alfred Mendes. In Allan Gardiner's terms these stories

have a spacioussness of social context that promises the detailed evocation of Trinidadian society to come in *Crown Jewel*. Although they are still limited to the viewpoint that de Boissiere knew personally, that of relatively well-off creoles, increasingly they came to measure the impact made on such people of the poverty of the mainly Black, lower sections of Trinidadian colonial society.⁵

De Boissiere began writing the first version of a Trinidadian novel around 1935. According to Gardiner this 'began life as a comedy of manners in which the perspective is again that of the well-off'.⁶ But the industrial and political unrest in Trinidad in the late 1930s, particularly the oil strikes and their effects on the political organisation of the Trinidadian working class, profoundly influenced de Boissiere's politics and hence his writing. He recalled, 'When the Trinidad uprising took place in 1937 I knew I was writing the wrong book, that I was writing about nothing'.⁷ Already, by this time, he was associated with the Negro Welfare Cultural and Social

Association, the militant, working-class 'Negro Welfare' of *Crown Jewel*.

The novel was then rewritten and completed during the war, the period of American military 'occupation' of Trinidad which drastically altered social attitudes and broke the hold of British colonialism. De Boissiere recalls a friend sending the manuscript to Knopf in the USA around 1943 where it was promptly rejected: 'this is a thesis, not a novel'.⁸ He left Trinidad for the USA in 1947 to take a course in motor mechanics offered to West Indians, and then, responding to a government advertisement for car factory employees in Victoria, emigrated with his family to Australia, in December 1947. He worked for a year at the General Motors car manufacturing plant in Melbourne before returning to clerical work in order to have time to write. He soon began attending meetings of the Fellowship of Australian Writers in Melbourne, and after encountering Frank Hardy he joined the left-wing Realist Writers' Group. He joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1951.

The Realist Writers were communist or left-leaning writers and would-be writers committed to realism and literature's role in social change. Members included Hardy, Eric Lambert, Walter Kaufmann, John Morrison, Bill Wannan, David Martin and Judah Waten, to mention only the better known. The sense of the *newness* and expanding strength of this contemporary realist project should not be under-estimated, allied as it was to a post-war optimism about progressive social change and emergent cultural nationalism – all of which could be seen to fall naturally within the project of communism too. Something of this enthusiasm can be seen in an editorial from the *Realist Writer* in March 1953 reporting on the previous year's activities:

Frank Hardy – *Journey into the Future* completed and published; *Power Without Glory* translated and sold overseas in scores of thousands ...; Ralph de Boissiere – *Crown Jewel* published here and accepted for translation in Polish and German; *The Invaders* [i.e., *Rum and Coca-Cola*] completed; Eric Lambert – *The Veterans* completed; *The Twenty Thousand Thieves* published in three editions in Great Britain; Judah Waten – *Alien Son* published, sold and reprinted, and a novel completed under Commonwealth Literary Fund grant; Walter Kaufmann – *Voices in the Storm* completed (now

printing); Nance McMillan – play *Christmas Bridge* completed and played in Sydney, Melbourne and London; Laurie Collinson – play *Traitor Silence* completed; David Martin – with regular publication of verse in working-class press, emerged as the most widely-read contemporary poet in Australia.⁹

This was the context that led to the formation of the ABS and the Realist Writers, a rich and productive context for de Boissiere's rewritten but still unpublished novel. What complicates the picture is that these enthusiasms and achievements coincided with an increased focus among communist writers (and Party officials) on the literary theory of socialist realism.

C. B. Christesen, editor of *Meanjin*, assisted de Boissiere in sending his manuscript to large publishers in London and the USA. At the same time, between 1949 and early 1952, de Boissiere began to rewrite *Crown Jewel* yet again, under the influence, in his own terms, of his contacts with the Australian working class:

two years in this country had a remarkable effect. You step out of very small, enclosed areas ... and you get into a much more developed country where you have a working class which is very experienced over a number of years. You gain a different outlook on life and on your own people. You see possibilities you couldn't see under Crown colony rule, which is based on slavery, on generation upon generation of blacks growing into slavery.¹⁰

'The effect,' he wrote elsewhere, 'was to give me a heightened appreciation of what West Indian workers were capable of achieving, a clearer realisation of our strengths and weaknesses'.¹¹ The earlier manuscripts are not available to be compared with the published novel so it is difficult to know exactly what changes were produced by de Boissiere's experience of the Australian working class – or perhaps more precisely his experience of the CPA, the ABS and the Realist Writers. Certainly, de Boissiere was consciously searching for a way to make his writing more fully Marxist; and publication by an independent left-wing Australian publisher rather than a mainstream London house meant thinking of the novel and its readers in a different way.

It is tempting, but almost certainly over-simplifying, to suggest that an original emphasis on the politics of race and British

colonialism, arising from de Boissiere's Trinidadian experience, was subordinated to the story of class conflict in the later version. But the representation of class and in particular the necessity for militant working-class organisation seems too fundamental to the novel's structure – and to de Boissiere's own historical experience – to be a late innovation; and in any case the politics of race and colonialism remain pervasive in the novel, never separated from the perspectives of class. What we might suggest is that de Boissiere's Australian (and in fact distinctively Melbourne) experience confirmed a particular historical perspective on these class struggles and made central to the novel the specifically communist theme of the struggle between a reformist 'labour' party (The Workers' Party) and a militant working-class organisation (the Negro Welfare). This was the central theme of Australian communist attempts to 'do' socialist realism, embodied in a series of historical novels in the 1940s and 1950s.

It is the case that de Boissiere's representation of the 1930s industrial and political struggles allows no positive role for bourgeois nationalist independence or anti-colonial politics. It is in this sense explicitly *not* a nationalist or perhaps even a 'post-colonial' novel. Gardiner argues that the 1952 version of *Crown Jewel* was thereby at odds with the CPA's adherence to Stalin's 'stages' theory of decolonisation, in which a first stage of support for nationalist movements would be followed by the struggle for working-class power.¹² The idea of nationalism, interestingly, is wholly absent from *Crown Jewel*, and while colonialism is the problem it is so primarily as a manifestation of capitalism. Independence is fleetingly mentioned but the key historical and political issue for the novel is the emergence of militant trade union organisation. In this emphasis, I'd argue, the novel was closer to the prevailing local understanding of the communist or socialist realist novel than Gardiner's doctrinal point might suggest.

Certainly at this very moment in the early 1950s the CPA was taking an increasingly close interest in 'cultural matters'. As I have argued elsewhere, it was only in this period after the war that literature and, in particular, the theory of socialist realism, began to carry a serious policy burden in the Party.¹³ Only in the fifties was the theory consistently named and defined. Nonetheless, what socialist realism meant in the actual practice of writing was less clear. The historical novel, as Lever has suggested, was one Australian interpretation of how the theory could be put into practice.¹⁴ Hardy's

'Author's Note' to *Power Without Glory* suggests another: showing 'men and women alive in an environment that is peculiarly Australian yet universal, typical of the stage of social history in which we find ourselves'.¹⁵ For de Boissiere himself — *after* the publication of his two Trinidad novels — the 'socialist realist method' meant:

The depiction of real life and not the fevered dreams of the author's bewildered, unhappy mind; the use of the typical to portray reality; the use of the dialectical approach in the portrayal of situations and characters; and a humanist attitude throughout our work.¹⁶

What separated socialist realists from the great realist writers of the past was 'the understanding of the objective laws operating in society, or if you like, the contradictions in society' which enabled 'the socialist writer to show 'the new inevitably rising to take the place of what is old and worn-out'.

Socialist realist theory, then, set broad boundaries by prescribing realist priorities in subject matter and plot, proscribing 'formalism' and 'subjectivism', and promoting 'typicality' and 'positive heroes' (characters and situations which exemplified the true progress of history). The primary task of fiction was to portray the essential characteristics of 'our time'. As a broad policy orientation it seemed clear (realism with a socialist tendency). As a theoretical framework, although abstract enough to bear endless reiteration, it could provide a coherent set of objectives or principles. In practice, however, for the writer confronting the blank sheet of paper — or in de Boissiere's case the always-rewritable manuscript — the issue of how to write a socialist or communist novel was still very much an open question, and it is important to see the debates and 'experiments' socialist realism occasioned as productive of writing and ideas, not merely as ideologically stifling and aesthetically toxic. Socialist realism spoke to needs and aspirations; it articulated a conceptual and historical dimension to the literary. It was precisely this issue of what social(ist) realism might mean, engaged as it was with the question of the nature of the *Australian* realist tradition, that led to the formation of new writers' groups, new magazines and new publishers.

Indeed, de Boissiere's novel was *early* rather than late in the Australian experience of socialist or communist fiction. While he could involve himself in a lively literary and political milieu which was

engaged in the very issues that he had himself been struggling with, there was scarcely a canon of works to 'inherit'. A significant number of Australian writers were associated with communism as Party members or as associates on various cultural and political causes or through a shared general commitment to the idea of a democratic national tradition, but the explicitly socialist novel was a rare thing. In the early 1950s there was only a handful of local models. Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Working Bullocks* had been published in 1926 and *Intimate Strangers* in 1937. The former had been received as a major achievement by literary nationalists at the time but appears to have largely disappeared from view until its republication in 1957. At this crucial moment in local cold war cultural politics, it soon assumed the role of the great forerunner of Australian socialist realism because of its representation of the 'typical' hero. *Intimate Strangers* never assumed that role, being always compromised by its bourgeois setting.

Closer in time were Prichard's Goldfields Trilogy (1946-1950) and Hardy's *Power Without Glory*. These were more typical of post-war socialist fiction than the 'revolutionary romanticism' of earlier radical writing. Both aspired to the qualities of classical realism in its historical, indeed *epochal*, mode. Even Hardy, whose model was Balzac although his effects were sometimes closer to those of popular fiction.¹⁷ Whereas radical fiction from the 1930s focused on the immediate crisis in contemporary capitalism, these post-war novels took a long historical perspective. While they might still be structured around moments of crisis these were now historical and seen through the epochal story of the rise of socialism, unionism, class consciousness and eventually, inevitably, communism. This was the movement of history that the socialist realist category of 'typicality' existed to express and which made the communist novel more than classical realism alone.

In one sense, then, there was only one story for socialist realism to tell — the inevitability of socialism — although its settings and occasions were multiple (Eureka, the rise of Labor, the depression or indeed industrial action on Trinidad's oilfields). Closer to the bone of the fiction itself, there were two stories: first, the inevitable betrayal of the workers' interests by social reformist 'labour' parties; and second, the emergence of working-class class consciousness, often expressed as the transition from fatalistic despair to self-conscious purpose or in the political register as the need, not just for political

militancy, but for organisation and discipline. Strangely perhaps, although it does make sense in terms of the historical trajectory just described, the communist novel seemed happiest in the 'pre-communist' period – both Prichard's and Hardy's work mostly *pre-figure* the emergence of communist parties or genuine working-class organisations. The story of industrial action is usually the story of a failed strike. The rest, as it were, was up to history.

To this extent, *Crown Jewel* might be seen as an Australian novel (or at least an Australian communist novel). The structuring of his 'pre-communist' story around the two principal themes indicated above might well be what de Boissiere learnt from his Australian milieu, although these were almost inevitable themes in any attempt to turn the narrative of Marxism into the narrative structures of the realist novel. *Crown Jewel* also shares with these slightly earlier Australian novels the incorporation of documentary elements into the fictional texture and the use of a large cast of characters to represent both social density and, more importantly, a range of class and political identities (and thus the dynamic of history).

At the same time *Crown Jewel* stands apart from the bulk of post-war Australian social or socialist realist fiction — including de Boissiere's own later 'Australian' novel, *No Saddles for Kangaroos* — in a number of crucial ways.

First, as suggested, the novel shows a sensitivity to – more than that, an absolute lived understanding of – the fine calibrations of race and colour as these both confirm and cut across the boundaries of class. This is brilliantly managed in the opening sections of the novel which introduce many of the principal characters. It begins in Dollard and Company's lumber yard where we are first introduced to two clerks, the creole Andre de Coudray, 'descendant of a count and a Negro slave' (430), and Joe Elias, son of a wealthy Syrian merchant. Andre reflects on missing out on a promotion to an imported Englishman; Joe's friends 'were almost all Negroes' (3). Soon after we meet the black worker Jacob, 'always ready to agree with those more powerful than he', another clerk, the Venezuelan Popito Luna, and Dollard himself, Trinidad-born but English-educated, his wealth based on land as well as commerce (first cocoa, then oil). In the space of a few pages, the calibrations of race, colour and class are shown in their everydayness and interiority, and generalised as the structure of colonial society:

In the mind of Trinidad 'Society' our people are graded somewhat as follows: first the whites, then the Portuguese, Chinese and Indians; then sundry nationalities, newcomers who have not yet gained an important place in the island's economic life, such as Syrians, Lebanese, East Europeans, Greeks; and last of all, the Negroes. Yet the blacks form the great bulk of the population. They and the Indians are the principal beasts of burden – the Negroes on the oilfields and the cocoa estates, the Indians in the sugar belt.

Andre knew it was an unwritten law that black men must be workers, white men must rule black men, and Englishmen must have the best jobs. Therefore, if one had not the good fortune to be English, one must be white; and if one could not be white, then one must not mix with those more coloured than oneself. But this was what Andre had begun to do...

About his colour he had always had a sense of guilt that affected him like a spiritual paralysis. A stranger might not guess that Andre was coloured, but a West Indian could always tell. (3)

Class is lived in the modality of race.¹⁸ The narrative shifts easily (if it weren't for the artifice of fiction one might say 'naturally') between the perspectives of history, politics and caste, and the domestic and intimate. The novel is memorable for its physical detail, of cooking and making and doing; and for its range of 'accents', hence its range of individuals. We enter Joe's family, Andre's, Luna's; we enter the stories of mothers, daughters, prostitutes, servants, lovers, husbands, and neighbours; we move across improvident or desperate poverty, petit-bourgeois aspiration, middle-class snobbery, white governing-class superiority. It is as if the situation of colonial capitalism, at once blatant and blind in its hierarchies of exploitation, enables de Boissiere to present both the *structure* of the society and the *dynamism* in the structure – the movement, the fault-lines, across the hierarchies of class and caste. This is not a quality one would associate with Australian social or socialist realist fiction.

What makes the novel much more than a thesis is the way in which it shows colonial society involving, depending upon, the interaction of the different classes and castes. It is interesting to read de Boissiere on what he learnt from *pre-revolutionary* Russian literature in contrast to Dickens:

Reading Dickens, I saw the rich and poor just as God had arranged it ... In the Russian pre-revolution novels, however, I found us all mixed up. We were all searching, tormenting others, ourselves tormented by the search for truth. Some were crushed, others rolled over and over in the dust by change. The intelligence stifled in the vast and backward countryside and the sleeping towns ... It was strange that I could find in the work of these writers echoes of my own tiny country where seldom were we out of sight of one another ... ¹⁹

Within the strict hierarchies of de Boissiere's Trinidad, too, the classes and races are 'all mixed up' (although we might note that his Chinese are always sly, calculating merchants). White superiority is implicated with black labour and depends upon maintaining shadings of colour and racial registers in between. As the novel shows, and as post-colonial theory has confirmed, white identity depends upon its construction of less-than-fully-civilised others, especially by mobilising race and colour differences even as colonial society multiplies hybridity. De Boissiere has a particular interest in border-line or border-crossing cases – those not quite white enough, such as Andre, Joe or Popito, but also those who struggle against their class status: both the positive heroes such as Andre, Le Maitre, leader of the Negro Welfare, Cassie, the black servant girl who becomes a political leader, or Elena Henriques, a poor Venezuelan who comes to identify proudly with colour; and the negative exemplars, Joe, whose desire for a Socialist party turns into self-serving ambition, or Boisson, of French heritage, leader of the quiescent Workers' Party.

Andre and Joe, in many ways, carry the thematic burden of the narrative. Both are positioned on the racial and class fault-line – not-quite-white-enough, certainly not English enough, middle class through old and new money respectively but excluded from the 'natural' governing class. Although the political message isn't subtle, as Andre goes one way and Joe the other, it is buried or embedded in the novel's larger, dispersed multiplicity of narrative lines. Something similar might be said about the other main thematic contrast, between Le Maitre, the heroic representative of the real workers' party, the party for the working class 'in itself', whose message is 'organisation', and Boisson, whose Workers' Party can only tell the working class to accept its lot. Le Maitre's heroic portrait

– a type of the socialist realist positive hero – is tempered by the representation of his erotic desire for Cassie which he has learned to express on her terms. These themes are also played out at a psychological level in the recurrent contrast in characters' attitudes and speech between fatalism and purpose, or detachment and commitment. If the English governing upper classes remain cartoon-like in their one-dimensional vanity – except for the Governor himself, a sympathetic figure sacked for his sympathies – perhaps, as Salman Rushdie suggests in a review of the 1981 reprint of the novel, this is because 'colonial whites frequently are mere cartoons of human beings'²⁰

Second, *Crown Jewel* is unusual, at least among the fiction of de Boissière's male contemporaries, in the prominence it gives to its female characters. Moreover, they are 'erotic' rather than merely sentimental figures – in this the novel shares more with the radical fiction of the thirties than the socialist realist fifties with the exception, perhaps, of Dorothy Hewett's *Bobbin Up* (1959).²¹ The female characters are not just the sentimental objects of desire for the male revolutionary whose attainment coincides with and completes the hero's political education. This plot, a common device of communist fiction (as in Judah Waten's *Time of Conflict*, 1961), is present in *Crown Jewel*, as the wavering Andre turns from his upper-class English lover to Elena Henriques. True love coincides with true politics. But Elena has already been given her own life in the novel, a story independent of Andre's; she has, as it were, her own narrative energy. (At the same time, the sentimental romance plot is explicitly deflected in the Le Maitre-Cassie story. Although political integrity is sometimes associated with 'manhood' in the novel, there is no sense that this has any priority over 'womanhood' [*not de Boissière's word*].) Although Andre is with us at the very beginning and end of the novel, his story, as suggested, disappears and reappears as only one thread in its much broader social canvas and political meaning. Thus the novel ends in a relatively low key, its various narrative threads held in suspension – the strike a mixed success, Le Maitre in prison, Cassie not with her own child but one adopted from a comrade's family, Mrs Henriques, still as generous, impractical and poor as at the outset, and so on.

This dispersed narrative structure has some similarities to de Boissière's Australian contemporaries. Both Prichard and Hardy evoked history through a large cast of characters whose stories are

pursued longitudinally, creating a sense of history that almost inevitably produced *sequels* – completed in Prichard's trilogy, planned in Hardy's announcement in the Author's Note to *Power Without Glory* of 'a series of novels, planned to give a picture of the mainstreams of Australian life in the 20th century'. De Boissiere published *Rum and Coca Cola* in 1956 and later wrote a third, still-unpublished novel about Trinidad. The relatively low-key, unresolved ending, in other words, is less a failure of plot than an imperative of historical meaning. The characters shrink back into history, into a larger story that exceeds the novel's bounds, even as they emerge *into* history through their political commitments. This has a specifically communist meaning too, as the relative failure or at best provisional success of the immediate politics (of the strike, the organisation) – figures the historical need and inevitability of communism or a Communist Party. But this is the story that can scarcely be told in the Australian communist novel. It can only be pre-figured, 'led up to', shadowed in the margins. De Boissiere's own *No Saddles for Kangaroos* is one of the rare Australian novels with a contemporary setting in which communism plays an explicit role.

Where *Crown Jewel* differs from most of its Australian contemporaries – and where again it recalls some of the earlier, 1930s radical fiction – is in its focus on a critical moment, the months that shook the world of Trinidad and colonial rule, in 1936-37. This gives it its remarkable sense of contemporaneity, its close-up feel for the domestic and physical details of its characters' existence, even as it moves outwards to broader social perspectives throughout the story. One of the novel's strengths is thus a dynamic of structure and perspective between *compression*, its focus on a critical moment which changes the political and personal lives of its central characters for ever, and *extension*, its historical story, with both a pre-history in British colonialism and slavery (the novel begins with a panoramic parable-style account of Trinidad from Columbus to 1935) and a continuation beyond its characters' lives – into the future, both of Trinidad and of the working-class everywhere.

If *Crown Jewel* does carry the message of its Australian communist contemporaries – what we might call the theme of *discipline* – this is entangled, energised, complemented and contradicted by what we might call the theme of *carnival*. I do not want to invoke stereotypes of 'colorful Caribbeans' – de Boissiere won't allow that – nor am I invoking a strictly Bakhtinian sense of

the term. I'm referring, instead, to the presence the novel itself gives to pleasure, joy, 'poetry' (the word is recurrent), its crowdedness and its comedy. These are not secondary to political struggle but as much a part of its meaning as a wage increase or the right to form a union. The principle of carnival, in this sense, is within but cannot be contained by the political struggle of the story or the ideological frame of the narrative. *Crown Jewel* largely resists the literary critic's habitual desire to separate the 'political' story from the 'human' story.

Although reviewed positively, the *Crown Jewel* of 1952 made little impression on Australian literature outside the circle of realist writers and ABS readers. Perhaps this was simply a question of its subject matter, or a result of being published by a small, independent, left-wing house, or because the critical establishment, whether in its nationalist or 'seriously literary' modes, couldn't read the book. It did enter the networks of translation and publication in the communist countries. More significantly, perhaps, it slowly made its way into the field of 'Commonwealth' literature, especially after its 1981 re-release (a revised text yet again). As Louis James wrote,

The discovery of this novel written in the 'forties ... gives the student of Caribbean writing a curious sensation. In many respects the tone, the style, is that of an earlier period. Yet it is a new voice, a new piece of the jigsaw which, when set in place, significantly changes the picture one knew before. If this novel had been published, what other writing would it have made possible? Would it have changed the direction of young writers in the way *In the Castle of My Skin* influenced a whole generation? We will never know. Meanwhile, *Crown Jewel* earns a place in Caribbean literature as a work of historical importance published out of its time.²²

From an Australian perspective, *Crown Jewel* is one of the very few Australian novels to have become part of world literature before the 1990s.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Allan Gardiner in the preparation of this essay.

¹ For the ABS see Jack Beasley, *Red Letter Days: Notes from Inside an Era*, ABS, Sydney, 1979, pp 129-88; Allan Gardiner, 'Ralph de Boissiere and Communist Cultural Discourse in Cold War Australia', PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1993; Ralph de Boissiere, 'On Writing a Novel', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol 17, no 1, 1982, p 11; Paul Adams, *The Stranger from Melbourne: Frank Hardy, a Literary Biography 1944-1975*, UWA Press, Nedlands, 1999, pp 62-7.

² Ralph de Boissiere, *Crown Jewel*, ABS, Melbourne, 1952.

³ See David Carter, *A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career*, ASAL/Halstead, Toowoomba/Sydney, 1997, pp 170-3. It should be noted that among the ABS's first books were also Walter Kaufmann's *Voices in the Storm* (1953) and Judah Waten's *The Unbending* (1954).

⁴ Beasley, op. cit., 137 & 139.

⁵ Gardiner, op. cit., p 28. Chapter One of this thesis provides rich detail on de Boissiere's Trinidad years. See also de Boissiere, 'On Writing a Novel', pp 1-4, and Gardiner's interview with de Boissiere, 'Comrades in Words: Ralph de Boissiere Interviewed by Allan Gardiner', *Kunapipi*, vol 15, no 1, 1993, pp 32-41.

⁶ Gardiner, 'Ralph de Boissiere', p 30.

⁷ In Stuart Sayers, 'Writers & Readers: Better Late than Never', *Age*, 8 August 1981, p 26.

⁸ 'Comrades in Words', p 38.

⁹ See Deirdre Moore, 'The Realist Writers', *Overland*, no 156, 1999, 24-9, which is followed by Ralph de Boissiere's own essay, 'Leaving the Realist Writers to Themselves', pp 30-4. Carter, op. cit., pp 112-15. David Martin, *My Strange Friend*, Picador, Sydney, 1991, pp 233-9. Adams, op. cit., pp 162-6.

¹⁰ Sayers, op. cit.

¹¹ De Boissiere, 'On Writing a Novel', p 10.

¹² Gardiner, 'Ralph de Boissiere', pp 82-3.

¹³ Carter, op. cit., pp 108-16, and see Beasley, op. cit., pp 171-84; David Carter, 'Reviewing Communism: *Communist Review* (Sydney) 1934-1966', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol 12, no 1, 1985, pp 93-7.

¹⁴ Susan McKernan [Lever], *A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the 20 Years after the War*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, p 42.

¹⁵ Frank Hardy 'Author's Note,' *Power Without Glory*, Realist Printing and Publishing, Melbourne, 1950.

¹⁶ De Boissiere, 'On Socialist Realism', *Communist Review*, March 1960, p 122.

¹⁷ Hardy, op. cit.

¹⁸ A phrase borrowed from Len Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, Routledge, London, 2001, p 62.

¹⁹ De Boissiere, 'Leaving the Realist Writers to Themselves', p 30.

²⁰ Salman Rushdie, 'Exemplary Lives', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 August 1981, p 910.

²¹ See Carter, *A Career in Writing*, pp 102-7 & 'Documenting and Criticising Society' in Laurie Hargenhan (ed.), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Penguin, 1988, p 386.

²² Louis James, 'Review: *Crown Jewel* by Ralph de Boissiere', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol 17, no 1, 1982, p 15.

Re-mapping the Heterotopic : A Study of Peter Goldsworthy's *Three Dog Night*

Debnarayan Bandopadhyay

[We] are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.

Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces'

Peter Goldsworthy's *Three Dog Night* (2003) seems to evolve on a complex drama of obsessive disorder arising out of a psycho-social pattern of sexuality and love. It begins with the return of Martin to Adelaide with his wife Lucy . This is followed by their encounter with Martin's friend Felix and this leads to their traumatic experiences. James Ley in *Sydney Morning Herald* (October 18, 2003) appreciates the fiction for its powerful characterisation of Martin and Felix and particularly emphasises the symbolic and allegorical meanings of their relationship . Malcolm Knox in *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 17, 2004) refers to the sense of place presented in terms of its symbolic and literary significations. But these critical assessments fail to notice an interweaving pattern of spatiality – a form of overlapping margins. The three central characters form Inchoate spaces that merge and yet disintegrate, leading to disjunction and transformation.

Michel Foucault gave currency to the term 'heterotopology' which he interpreted in two different ways . In '*Of Other Spaces*', he interprets it as the co-existence of several incompatible spaces in a specific real place. Again in *The Order of Things*, he explains it as an interweaving of disjunctive, fragmentary spaces in one impossible space. Despite the contradictory position of Foucault's analysis in his two works on questions of heterotopología, he clearly accepts the multivalency of spaces. In 'Of Other Spaces' Foucault contests the nineteenth-century obsession with time-related analysis iconised in history and suggests that the twentieth century will be an epoch of space. He therefore comments, "This problem of the human site or living space is not simply that of knowing whether there will be enough space for men in the world -a problem that is certainly quite important - but also that of knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of

human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end. Our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites"¹. Again in *The Order of Things* he contends how different forms of episteme relocate themselves in different cultural sites in different periods of history. Although this work was largely attacked by Jean Paul Sartre on grounds of an overt defence of bourgeoisie, It categorically displayed the fragmentation of multiple spaces.

In my examination of Peter Goldsworthy's novel, I would like to propose a Foucaultian reading of space in terms of socio-psychic relations. In other words, social and psychic space of Martin, Felix and Lucy begin to constantly change leading to a continuum of self-subversion. What begins as a nostalgic reconstruction of geographical space with Adelaide as the central cultural site comes to be transformed gradually into a site of psychic anxiety intensified by appetitive desires.

The novel begins as a configuration of paradisal space, as a re-discovery of Edenic exoticism. It primarily initiates an intertextual reading of the pastoralist, ex-urban spatiality of Adelaide and the Miltonic Eden. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Book IV), Adam's explanation of the meaning and significance of Edenic space seems to fit well into the pattern of Martin playing the tourist guide for Lucy. Just as Milton presents a hierarchic rise in the Edenic landscape, so also the landscape of Adelaide shows a spatial ascension : " There might be higher mountains on the planet than the Adelaide Hills, but they are no closer to heaven. Each valley is a little deeper and greener than the last, and each ridge, a little higher and bluer, seems another step in some sort of ascension" (3). Lucy's response is also worth consideration : " 'Paradise', Lucy murmurs, smitten" (3). When in Chapter 2 (Part I), Martin takes Lucy along to Felix's place, Martin reconstructs the place as he knew it in his childhood and inevitably brings up the image of the Garden of Eden : " Fruit falling off the trees, blackberries all along the creek. We'd eat and drink and talk ourselves sick. For a boy from the Western suburbs it was the Garden of Eden" (18). Here apricots become the new alternative for the apple in the Garden of Eden. The discursive discussion on the forbidden fruit creates an inter-spatiality which changes the exotic landscape of Adelaide into a land of anxiety and psychic complexity. In the Biblical myth, Eve was the first to be tempted by Satan and she then persuaded Adam into tasting the

forbidden fruit. It is implicit in Lucy feeding Martin the apricot : " She presses an apricot into my mouth to silence me; the ripe fruit explodes at first bite. I shut my eyes; I would seal my ears also, if possible , losing myself in the singularity of the pleasure" (19). Again in Chapter 3 (Part I), Martin continues to say " Nothing is innocent" (22-23) and finally concludes: "There is always a snake in the grass" (23). The sudden reference to the Virgilian line 'Latet anguis in herba' and addition of the translation of *semper* (always) once again remind the reader of the Biblical mythicising of snake representing evil. This is an overt indication of the presence of snake in the garden.

But it can be really far too illogical to read the Adam-Eve-Satan paradigm into the Martin-Lucy-Felix story in mechanical, absolutist terms. What I intend to suggest is that the novel is primarily focussed on the paradisaal space (with faint Biblical/Miltonic referents) gradually transforming itself into a complex design of psychic space. William Haworth says : "Places write upon the mind, what began as a physical object becomes in time the work of subjectivity. As a paradigm, place is physical, social, and intellectual" (512). Lucy who has been enchanted by the idyllic, exotic Adelaide gradually comes to encounter a different level of reality. The question of paradisaal space itself is highly problematic. Martin's representation of Adelaide seems to be nothing but a surface level of reality—a carefully constructed vision of semi-pastoralist space designed and articulated , partly, through nostalgia and , largely , through re-discovering his rootedness in terms of securing an established unity; his exotic reconstruction of 'home' is therefore prompted by an enigma of arrival and a desire to reconcile himself to the space that he had left. Adelaide, for Martin, essentially forms an emotional space constructed by memory, attachment and the sense of belonging to a community : " I am introducing Lucy to my larger neighbourhood, but I am also reintroducing myself. Much has changed in ten years, if more in quantity than in quality. More of the same? Grown larger, the city seems to have become merely more familiar – an exaggeration of herself" (103).

Martin's sense of space, therefore, brings to our mind the problematic of 'simulacrum' , a point so distinctively structured by Baudrillard in *Precession of Simulacra*. While contending on the relation between map and territory, Baudrillard contests the earlier standpoint of the precession of territory over the map: " ...it is the map that precedes the territory—PRECESSION OF SIMULCRA—it

is the map that engenders the territory" (1733). According to Baudrillard, simulacra represent the images that undermine our natural desires, forcing us instead to essentialise, to appropriate and accept the images which are constructed by media, films, advertising ; in other words, the natural desires and deeds are determined by the images of the 'hyperreal'. Martin's construction of the Adelaide landscape is the simulacra of the hyperreal that Lucy initially accepts. Martin here acts as an agent of representation, projecting a hyperreal paradisaal space.

But it is Felix who dismantles the projection of the hyperreal space. Felix's first appearance as urinating , shaking his penis pulls down the artifice of the paradisaal space. When Martin comes alone to meet Felix, he discovers a new identity of Felix. He begins to realize that Felix belongs to a different space altogether. He has been adopted by the aborigine tribes and re-named Felix Johnson Japaljarri. His skin-name brings about a disjunction , an alterity of space. Even Martin seems to have changed. Lucy feels that the Martin she knew in England is different from the Martin in Australia. : "You sometimes seem ... different in Australia"(63). Martin also suffers from a creeping sense of fear : " Is it possible that if we remain here , in Australia, Lucy might find it more difficult to love me ?" (64). Probably Australia is not one place but two places. Australia constructed in terms of urban space and Australia belonging to a space beyond the known borders are two different spaces. At the ordinary level of reality, Felix is contagious, carrying the virus of hepatitis C positive and therefore debarred from surgery. But it probably symbolises Felix's alienation from the so-called civilised world. Beyond the elitist, urban Australia, there is the real Australia—the place of Dreaming. This is evident in Felix's explanation of the painting that he brings for Lucy on her birthday : "Warlpiri iconography is pretty simple. This might be a person, an animal, a place. In this case, it's hole in the ground—a waterhole. The place where the Dreamtime budgie comes out" (68). Again, when Lucy asks if Ngarlpa is a real place, Felix replies : "Of course. The Dreaming places are always real" (68). Felix later describes his painting as a "quest story. A journey. Like many of the dreamings" (75). When Lucy and Martin become inordinately inquisitive about the scars on his body, his adoption into the tribe, his skin name, he tugs out his genital : "He holds it pinched between thumb and fingers, as if by the scuff of its thick neck, half male organ, half some finned, winged

thing. Reared up, turned inside out, it looks like nothing so much as a pink filleted fish" (95). This particular incident makes them aware of the disjunction between the hyperreal and the real: the real world of Felix and the hyperreal world of Martin. It is, in other words, a disjunction between two different spaces. When they leave Felix's house, Martin realises : "We might still be in the valley, his valley, but we have left his universe. He stands motionless, impassive; a stone monument planted on a ridge to warn off intruders" (98).

Space and border are probably Peter Goldsworthy's favourite themes. This is faintly suggested in his first novel *Maestro* where Paul and Keller seem to be belonging to different spaces , though they are inextricably related to each other in a strange bond of emotional relationship. This is more clearly evident in *Wish* where the world of two different languages—the spoken word and the sign language – creates two distinctive forms of spatiality. The central character J.J. says : " English is my second language. Sign was – is – my first. I still think in Sign, I dream in Sign. I Sign in my sleep..." (3). But belonging to both worlds engenders a dichotomous relationship between himself and his parents : "In my teens I found it difficult to be their son in public. My behaviour is hard to explain, harder still to excuse, but I seemed to change overnight" (23).

In *Three Dog Night* , he negotiates the problematic of space and border in a more complex manner than in his earlier novels. The theories of space and border have been extensively interpreted in recent times. Henri Lefebvre configured space in purely political terms. But Edward Soja in his 1996 book *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places* considered Place as social and transurban. He attempted to examine space in terms of place, location and territorial community. He says: " These 'curious' sites are socially constructed but they simultaneously recreate and reveal the meaning of social being" (14). But space can be restructured, annihilated, transformed, and can move beyond a located space. Space can therefore be relative and can naturally lead up to a problematic of border. Thus Gloria Anzaldua in *La Frontera* raised a question of cultural representation which is complicit in producing the border , in orchestrating the projection of the Other: "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity" (2212). In Lucy's birthday party, Frank seems to be an appropriate model for representing the mainstream cultural space where he becomes particularly active in

replicating the border between the traditional social space and the private space of Felix. The birthday party squabble between Frank and Felix seems to negotiate the epistemic contradictions of space and identity. The world of acknowledged episteme seems to disqualify Felix's presence in the party. When Felix, anguished and agitated, leaves the party, Martin follows him ; but they are divided by the borders of two different forms of spatiality: " And he steps out into the street and slams the door shut in my face. Before I have time to follow , the house behind me is full of departing guests, talking overcheerfully of babysitter deadlines, forgotten engagements, urgent hospital calls" (84).

We should also consider Martin's voyeurism when he tries to spy into the suspected intimacy of Lucy with Felix. When Lucy is invited on Felix's birthday alone, he begins to suffer from a consciousness of an imagined spatial border that separates them. Unable probably to bear the guilt of spying on his own wife, when he talks to Lucy on a mobile phone, it produces another form of interspatiality and border crossing. Martin transfers himself into a virtual space of electronic voice , desperately trying to come to terms with the new space that has emerged out of the Felix-Lucy relationship. He finds himself pathetically unable to cross the border that separates him from this re-territorialisation of emotional relationship. He can see Felix kneeling before Lucy who stands surrounded by "flickering pinpoints of light" (167).

From Chapter 12 (Part II) , a new configuration of space emerges. The earlier space that accommodates Martin and Lucy gradually breaks apart. After Lucy agrees to become Felix's dinner companion, a new form of spatiality develops that pushes Martin to the margin. On Felix's birthday dinner, Felix invites Lucy alone, dichotomising Martin from their world:

"No answer. Nothing but the sound of her swallowing , a small sound expanding to fill a vast available silence.

'Talk to me, Luce'.

'You're not invited', she murmurs eventually.

'I'm sorry?'

'He wants to cook dinner for me , just the two of us'" (150).

But it is extremely difficult to determine the nature of this

dichotomising of relationship. Felix, believing in the Walpiri marital/social code, stabilises a new form of social permissiveness that negates the private and personal space of sexuality. Felix says: "The Warlpiri have marriage. But the law permits acts of, shall we say, generosity outside marriage. Acts of comfort. Mostly between relatives who hunt together. Between brothers especially". (159).

This disorientation in terms of personal relationship further fragments itself into another space. : the cyberspace. In moments of terrible psychomachia , Martin often seeks refuge in a world of sexual imagery which largely iconises a territory of sexual exoticism. Fear, insecurity and jealousy drag him into a world of virtual reality where he browses into queer images of sexual representation: " Infantile trauma, repressed memories, foreskin envy" (163). He even enters into a virtual sexual combat : " Absurd fears plague me, adolescent insecurities that I cannot exorcise. What might his cock look like erect? Does it give greater pleasure?" ((163). After Lucy leaves for a trip to the Walpiri region with Felix, Martin is further immersed in the cyberspace of virtual reality. Stuart Moulthrop in his essay '*You Say You Want a Revolution*' uses the term hypertext to signify the electronic information provided in the cyberspace. Hypertext is the unseen repository of electronic documents that the reader/viewer can activate according to his personal choice. Hypertext therefore produces a virtual reality that disrupts the traditional space of reality. The user's access to this realm of cyber-spatiality turns the hypertextual narrative into an "adventure" , a "game" that may even determine the individual libido. Martin's jealousy and desire drive him into a hypertextual space, a world of sexual simulation and mechanical dream. Moulthrop comments : " The original Xanadu (Samuel Taylor Coleridge's) came billed as ' A Vision in a Dream' , designated doubly unreal and thus easily aligned with our area of 'operational simulation' where, strawberry fields, nothing is real in the first place, since no place is really 'first'" (2507). Similarly Lucy's absence causes a psycho-sexual rivalry with Felix. His inability to cope with this world of concrete reality drives him into a world of sexual simulation. In other words, his self-referential fear and jealousy produce a psychic implosion. He therefore imagines : "Effortlessly I imagine them together in a motel bed , in *his* bed. Felix in Lucyland" (207). He seems to suffer from a psychic disorder of penis envy: " A stream of images downloading from Id World – I see again that odd, fish-headed cock, imagine it reared up, gaping

and huge. I hear again the sounds of her pleasure" (207).

It is a world of silence where virtual noise is produced through sexual advertisements, spam mails, and occasional phone calls from Lucy. It is a strange world of polyphonic space where self encounters the self. The distressed, anguished self of Martin constructs the contrapuntally positioned image of Lucy and Felix. But the entire world of Martin, silent and dumb externally, goes on projecting a strange dialogic experience with the world of virtual reality. This fragmentation of real space and virtual space shows the fragmentation of Martin's self.

When he receives the message of Felix's critical condition and meets Lucy in the hotel, there takes place a painful anagnorisis of Lucy's sexual relationship with Felix. Even when Lucy comes close to him, he fails to reclaim his territory, because he begins to visualise Lucy's sexuality with Felix : " As Lucy , pressed back against the closed door, legs parting, responds in turn, I feel myself become flaccid. My body has led me into this solo—it now changes its independent mind. Conscious thought follows physiological thought within seconds : the noises and movements of her arousal , her whimpers and trembling knees , have been shared with another man. I cannot avoid hearing—seeing—them together" (245).

The novel strangely moves into two different Warlpiri social codes. According to Felix, Warlpiri sexuality admits "generosity outside marriage" , "between brothers especially" (159). Felix therefore attempts to identify Martin as his brother. As Bedford drives Martin to One Shoe Creek, he tells the story of spearing a white man for keeping two black women too long. Just after the narrative of this spearing custom, Bedford asks Martin:

" ' You brother to that Pillage , eh, Mardin?'

' No. Just friends' " (219).

Martin seems to disavow relationship with Felix probably to emphasise his right to kill by spearing Felix in terms of the Warlpiri social code.

When he meets Felix in the hospital, Martin says :

" ' He [Bedford] told me one thing I wanted to hear— if you steal my wife I'm allowed to spear you.' My words begin jokily but end with some venom, sharpened spear-points themselves" (231).

Felix replies : “ ‘ Required, I would have thought. Tribal law is strict’. His grin sets into something fixed. ‘You want to spear me?’ ” (231).

Felix offers the proper *kunka*, the payback, probably in a manner it was resolved in the Central Lands Council earlier. Martin shouts : “ I don't want it , Felix. I don't want anything from you. Anything that makes me remember you” (303).

Finally the needle comes to iconise the spear. He pushes the dose of morphine into Felix: he fulfils the demand of the Warlpiri code by using the needle as his spear: “ I raise a thick vein in the crook of his elbow and slip a needle into the vein. A small kickback of blood unravels in the morphine solution; the needle-tip is -positioned” (317).

The last part of the novel (Part V) completes the process of total subversion of paradisaical spatiality which initiated the narrative. Martin is about to inherit Felix's “half-acre of paradise”, pending the legal formalities of inheritance. He seems to once again configure the paradisaical space in Felix's farm house: “ Paradise, three months on and thirty degrees colder. All night rain has washed the valley; now a feeble winter sun edges upwards into a cloudless sky. The frigid air bites at my face; the mere sight of the rain-sodden world below – its wet pastures and glinting farm ponds – seems to provoke an answering moisture from my eyes” (327-328). Now Martin feels relaxed. He enjoys the “vegetable pleasure of tobacco” (328). He seems to participate in the seemingly idyllic, sensuous bounty of nature: “... light, water, leaf— have the power to gladden me directly, instinctively, entering unexamined through eye and ear” (328).

But as soon as he discovers Lucy's letters written to Felix, the paradisaical space crumbles down immediately and comes to be replaced by a monologic psychic space. Martin now begins to look upon the same house as “a mailbox, a brick-and- mortar envelope” (332). The “half-acre of paradise” comes to be ironically transformed into an enclosed space of a mailbox. Lucy's letters become distinctive signifiers of justice/payback or *kunka*. This consciousness of justice brings about references to death: death in its multiple configurations. He remembers himself carrying the dead body of Felix : “ I hoisted the body of my wife's lover onto my shoulder that last day at the sinkhole” (333). He reconstructs their first experience , as medical students, of seeing a corpse: “ ...the first noisy swing open of the

skull, the first penetration of greasy body cavities by gloved fingers. The process of skin-thickening — skin-kinship— that is needed to survive our trade surely begins here" (336). Finally comes Martin's self-imaging as a murderer. He remembers Felix's words : " Someone is always to blame, Frau Doktor. An enemy. A sorcerer" (338).

The end of the novel configures the entire narrative as the 'writerly space' , a space where the narrator takes total control of the fictional strategy. It now becomes a space where the narrator becomes the sole interpreter of what is being narrated. The first person narrator merges the dualism of 'actio' and narratio'. As a result, the idea of the living present breaks down, as the narrator displays an image of himself telling the story, probably from an objective distance. Act of telling a story, on the part of the narrator, is an act of belonging to the present while being engaged in reviving the past. "Story-telling" and "being in the story" are two different forms of temporal space. Martin seems to emerge as a story-teller , reconstructing the image of the past: " I have tried to tell this story as it happened, in the living, breathing present" (340). The only way to escape pain and depression is to practise the narrator's disengagement . Martin's refusal to read Lucy's letters any more and to throw them away in the rain seems to be almost a symbolic act of forgetting. It is only forgetfulness that may bring back the paradisaical space that he has lost. He can therefore assert: " Exectabo. I shall wait" (341). It is this affirmation , expectabo, that looks forward to a teleological, linear spatiality.

Notes :

¹ Foucault's "Des Espace Autres," was published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October, 1984. It was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. As it was not reviewed for publication by the author, it is not considered to be part of the official corpus of his work. The manuscript was relaeased in an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Foucault's death.

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Skating on Thin Paper :

A Journey in the Guise of a Twentieth Century Australlian Woman Writer.

Odette Kelada

This paper poses the question of what it was like to be an Australian woman writer throughout the twentieth century into the new millennium. The purpose of this paper's creative narrative approach is to gain a sense of the greater picture in order to power between connections that might span fifty years and which one would never see without this retraction of the lens. We'll borrow a little from Celtic mythology, which sees time as circular and fluid, like a river, in which case a jet ski is the perfect vehicle. So imagine if you please, that you, as the reader, are now commencing a form of literary time travel. Before we set off however, I'm going to place our journey in the social and historical context of what it means to look at the lives of women writing in Australia.

The phrase 'Australian woman writer' is in many ways a contradiction, as the identity of 'Australian' and 'writer' in our culture is associated with masculinity. 'Australian' is linked with the all male images of the swagman, bushranger, ocker and larrikin. The position of 'writer' is often seen as a male one as it occupies the masculine public sphere as opposed to the feminine domestic private domain. It is an active, expressive identity not passive and receptive. Drusilla Modjeska in *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, gives an avid description of how historically, being a woman 'intersected at every point with being a writer' as women were frequently caught between their professional needs and capacities and their desires as well as their duties as women¹.

Women writers often had a great deal of responsibility in managing husbands, children, parents, housework and possibly paid employment. The particular obstacles they negotiated included finding the time, confidence and space to write. The different situations they were in and the ways they chose to handle their situations, depending on the time or critical event that was occurring in the literary scene, influenced the paths they took to becoming professional writers. Some were 'spinsters' looking after parents,

some were wives and mothers and others were more bohemian, walking a fine line between their freedom to write and their reputation. The early twentieth century Australian woman writer, Miles Franklin, said with regard to the situation for women writers:

A woman writer...has no protection such as enjoyed by men who use their wives and mistresses as a marline to save themselves from wear and tear².

On the other hand, some writers placed their role of wife and mother over intellectual pursuits. Mary Gilmore for example, argued that roastology (the art of cooking a roast) was more important for girls than education or 'biology' as she put it³.

It is against this backdrop that women writers struggled to be heard and taken seriously. When they were acknowledged, this recognition was often accompanied by a prejudiced attitude that undermined their writing on the basis of their gender and dismissed their themes as trivial. When they were applauded, it was for exhibiting masculine attributes, anything identified as feminine was a drawback. It was despite being women that women writers received any real validation.

In *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Anne Summers uses the phrase 'cultural apartheid' to characterise the strong tendency in Australia to consider women's art forms as 'apart from and inferior to male ones'⁴. The notion of 'recovering' Australian women writers is one that emerged with post modern theoretical and feminist ideas of the text within context and the subjective, fictive nature of history as more a telling of the dominant discourse than any regurgitation of fact; as David Malouf said 'History is not what happened but what is told'⁵. The writer Eleanor Dark was a little more specific than that. As she put it:

¹ Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*, (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1981), 191.

² Ibid

³ Sharyn Pearce, 'Fishing for women: Mary Gilmore's journalism in *The Worker*' in *The time to write. Australian women writers 1890-1930*, ed. Kay Ferres, (Melbourne, Penguin, 1993), 100.

⁴ Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, (2nd edn., Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin, 1975) 80-81.

⁵ David Malouf quoted in *Sociological and historical perspectives on Australia as portrayed by contemporary writers*, R.Kerr, in *Australian Poetry and Fiction*, ed. K. R. Dhawan, (New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1997) 19..

History as it has been mainly written is, very literally the story of man⁶.

With this premise, the retelling of the history of women writers in Australia becomes an intriguing exploration. This is because the further one delves into Australia's literary history as it stands, the clearer it is that a great deal concerning women writers has been hidden or eclipsed. In the struggle of the dominant discourse, that of the white male hegemony, to present itself as a unified, superior purveyor of Australian literature, it has by necessity undermined and to a large extent ignored many of the voices that would show the cracks in this unified front. By a process of dismissal and denial, coupled with a value system that has sanctified masculine ideals, themes and experiences, Australian literary culture as it has been understood and passed on, represents only a biased selection of Australian writing. The invisibility of women writers is an act of history being rewritten or to use the Greek word, palimpsest:

Writing on a surface whose earlier writing has been rubbed out⁷.

As archaeologists chip away at stones to determine the original name of a statue, so do we need to chip away at the stories that have been constructed around the idea of women writers in Australia's past.

In looking at the journeys of Australian women writers over a length of time, I hope to demonstrate how their diversity and areas of commonality reveal an engagement with the changing cultural notions of sex, place and writing that will expand our notions of these stages in Australia's cultural, social and political history as much as it expands our notion of these women writers. So let us start at the turn of the twentieth century, ignite our imaginative, story-teller's eye and begin, much like the literary character of a flâneur, or Virginia Woolf's narrator from *Room with a View*, to observe and wander through time in the guise of an Australian woman writer.

The year is 1901 and the new century is emerging in a flurry of anxiety over what it means to be Australian instead of British. The need for strong virile men in this new nation smashes up against

⁶ Barbara Brooks & Judith Clark, Eleanor Dark *A Writer's Life*, (Sydney, Pan Macmillan, 1998) 346.

⁷ Robert Nelson, 'Mildura palimpsest' in *The Age* (May 9th, 2001) 7.

the rising surge of suffragettes who have just secured the vote for white women in Australia, so there is friction. What is it to be a man and a woman? Is there going to be a line of nurturing mothers ready to care for the fine young men who will in turn plant the seeds of this budding nation's future? The Bulletin tackles 'The Great Woman Question' announcing 'women's enfranchisement now means man's enslavement' however women are not as much of a threat as the Chinese say because:

The tendency of the feminine mind is invariably towards conservatism⁸.

You attempt to fasten your corset, smoothing the lines of your crinoline skirt. It feels very heavy and hot with all this cloth hemming you in. After the trial of dressing yourself, you sit at your desk and pick up your pen. You have the urge to 'scribble'.

With this surge of nationalism, there is a backlash against anything 'British'. You don't want to be like the wowsers or the lady writers whose romantic fiction was derided as nonsense. They are seen as trivial and soppy. You want to be taken seriously. The only people you have ever seen taken seriously are men. You are audacious enough to want to be a 'real writer'. You decide to write like a man. You glance up at a photo of your grandmother and Aunts. They purse their lip in displeasure. Without knowing it, you have soaked up the ideas of the time; the elevation of the novel from popular fiction to high art, the denigration of romantic fiction and the dominance of masculine authored nationalistic 'bush' stories. Women's fiction like that of Rosa Pried and Ada Cambridge confronted many controversial issues about leaving marriage, unwanted pregnancy and abortion, but it has all been dismissed as women's fanciful, hysterical notions that have no intellectual or profound content. You want to write along the lines of Joseph Furphy and Henry Lawson, but you are not a man. You find that as a young girl, you are caught in the crossfire, secretly devouring the romances in the Goulburn Evening Penny Post but then finding yourself in the Australian bush and choosing to use your very earthy setting and sardonically send up the myths of femininity and romance. You have a bush girl as the central character speaking in the first person.

⁸ Susan Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women's Writing 1880's-1930's* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1995), 95.

Then you might find yourself in the position of Miles Franklin, whose masculine pseudonym did not fool Henry Lawson who 'hadn't read three pages' when he saw:

What you will no doubt see – that the story had been written by a girl. And as I went on, I saw that the work was Australian – born in the Bush. I don't know about the girlishly emotional parts of the book – I leave that to girl readers to judge; but the descriptions of Bush life and scenery came startlingly, painfully real to me⁹.

You become a celebrated heroine, a little Australian bush girl. You may find yourself referred to as Miles did by H.M. Green in *A History of Australian Literature* as an 'attractive little devil in spite of everything'¹⁰. Everything being that the main character, Sybylla, is the antithesis of conventional female role models. You may even have Norman Lindsay reminisce about your 'pert rump' to The Bulletin's publisher, A.G Stephens, when he bumps into you at The Bulletin's office¹¹. Unfortunately you also suffer huge family upsets because everyone assumes the character and her family are autobiographical, because women don't create original ideas, they draw on their own personal experience. You are hurt, humiliated and have sinned against your family so you are practically banished. You leave home for the city and have trouble writing again and certainly not in your own name. As Miles Franklin said:

I wish now I had written a ladylike book that I could have been pleased with. The bother raised by Sybylla Penelope in print so petrified me that I closed her book and have not reopened it¹².

What if you took a different turn and wrote within the nationalistic Bush tradition, without melding it with romance? The Bush story from a woman's point of view. Say something along the lines of Barbara Baynton. You turn the Australian Bush from a place of masculine mateship into a hostile land, highlighting the grim realities for women in the bush. In stories like Baynton's 'The Chosen Vessel' (1902)¹³, a woman is alone with a baby in the bush. The

⁹ Ibid 80.

¹⁰ Frances McInerney, 'Miles Franklin, My brilliant career, and the female tradition', in *Who is she?: Images of Women in Australian Fiction*, ed. Shirley Walker, (St. Lucia, Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 1983) 73.

¹¹ Op-cit, Modjeska, 35.

¹² Miles Franklin quoted in *Miles Franklin*, Marjorie Barnard, (Melbourne, Hill of Content, 1967), 51

¹³ Barbara Baynton, *Bush studies: Classic Australian short stories by Barbara Baynton*, (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1994 edn) 132-140.

cruelty of the bush merges with the cruelty of men as a stranger stalks around her hut and eventually murders her. It is a story of harrowing power. What response would a woman writer receive?

AG Stephens tried to account for the power of Baynton's writing. It must be unintentional, a fluke. Stephen's said,

Mrs Baynton is palpably interested in her heroine and yet – possibly unconsciously, possibly owing to a woman's inherent inability to express herself – instead of a heroine she has given us the Bush¹⁴.

So a woman has managed to write a good bush story but she was 'unconscious' at the time. Given that Baynton's writing clearly explores her heroine's experience in the bush, not simply either 'bush' or 'heroine', Stephens' comment reflects the misogynistic criticism aimed at women who wrote outside the traditional feminine spheres of romance and children's stories. Stephens' comment also reveals that 'author' is so masculine in Stephen's mind that he cannot use the reflexive pronoun 'herself' when speaking about a woman writer.

Those who don't pick up on the 'woman's point of view' subversiveness of the text simply believe you are mimicking men; a pale imitation of established male bush writing. So there you are at your desk, you are about to put pen to paper after contemplating all this and finding the courage to presume that you can think and write even if you are a girl, when your mother comes in and finds you on the verge of intellectual pursuit. How dreadful! A bluestocking for a daughter! You have your pens and paper taken away in case you think too much and become infertile¹⁵. So after all we didn't get much writing done at the turn of the twentieth century. But fortunately, given this is an imaginative narrative in the guise of a woman writer, we have an escape route. When the lights are out, you travel two decades ahead in time, to the 1920s, the 'golden decade'.

Now you can get rid of some of those layers. You may even be daring and pop off the corset, ('pop' being ironic as it will take a few hours if you can do it by yourself as it has a million little clasps and you can barely breathe) and 'pop' on a brassiere. The Great

¹⁴ Op-cit, Shendan, 32.

¹⁵ Dale Spender, *Heroines: A Contemporary Anthology of Australian Women Writers*, (Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin, 1991), 9.

War has ended. No one knows there's going to be another one to live through so there is an air of celebration; release from a long darkness. Jazz is buzzing in from America, electric advertising signs spell ASPRO, one letter at a time flashing. There is hot running water, films and an airplane flies overhead, writing HELLO in smoke in the sky. You find yourself once again at a desk, the paper and pen before you, chewing the new 'PK gum'. You want to be a woman writer; the question is what choices are you are going to make to get heard? In the 'golden decade', the literary scene is centred around male venues such as the pubs and women are not allowed in pubs, not 'respectable' women anyway.

Nettie Palmer, a writer, critic and literary journalist, observed on returning to Australia about this time from England, that the literary establishment was exclusively made up of men, who's agenda left no room for women. The influential circle of the 1920's literati was in Sydney, revolving around Norman and Jack Lindsay. The Lindsay's circle was misogynistic territory as these men lived in what they touted as 'bohemia' and in bohemia, women were useful only as muses, to inspire art. Women in this realm existed as purely decorative objects. In bohemia, female sexuality was a vehicle for male creativity, not an autonomous or intellectual entity. For Lindsay's group, beauty was embodied in 'Woman' and was to be discovered both sexually and artistically through the intellect, which was seen as inherently male¹⁶.

Nettie turned her attention to creating her own network of women, where they could be taken seriously, but more of that in the next decade. Of course there may be no question for you and you could choose respectability without qualms. You could use Mary Gilmore as your role model, who wrote to AG Stephens,

I didn't contract when I married to be a writer. I contracted to be a wife and a mother¹⁷.

But then of course you may find yourself saying sharply to Dulcie Deamer as Deamer recalls in a conversation with Gilmore,

My writing's – they've still got the flour of the pastry board on them' and go on to tell how your verses are jotted down in between your son coming into the kitchen and clamouring 'Mumma, I want

¹⁶Op-cit, Modjeska 21.

¹⁷Op-cit, Ferres 12.

some bread and jam!' More than enough to drive any male poet straight to the pub!¹⁸

So you may find yourself at the bohemian café's after all, given the isolation and trials of respectability. So say you walk into La Café Bohemia, better known as Betsy's, where the Lindsays and the rest of the Bohemian mob congregate over sly grog and spaghetti. There is Betsy, with her flaming red hair, screeching voice and tubercular hip. You're bubbling with creative jouissance. You are ready to make your mark. Where do you start? First off, you have the major problem that you may as well be invisible. It is difficult to get any of these men's attention as they assume that as a woman you don't have any original intellectual rigour. Their eyes slide over you like butter. You see that the only women hold in any regard are the attractive muses they feel women ought to be. Maybe this is the key to getting a word in, after all what does a woman have if she cannot use her sex to her advantage? You could cut your hair into a kiss curl bob, paint on some cupid bow lips and shorten your hemline. If you do come to this conclusion, you may find yourself somewhere along the road that Anne Brennan did. Daughter of the famous poet Christopher Brennan, she was according to Axel Clark, her father's biographer,

A lively conversationalist, an entertaining writer and could speak several European languages¹⁹.

Jack Lindsay recalls that Anne Brennan had always wanted to write and was keen to talk writing and literature with him and the other writers at Betsy's. She never did become a writer however. She was surrounded by the impenetrable masculine elitism of the bohemian's renaissance of 'Vitalism and Beauty'.

Anne Brennan gained entry to this male literary circle on the kudos of her father and by liberally endowing sexual favours. She danced on tables for the men at Betsy's. She became a 'whore'. Jack Lindsay said that Anne had never shown him anything she wrote and he assumed her talk of writing was an effort to assert herself against her demoralising lifestyle. So one could gain entry if you are willing to dance on a few tables, amidst bottles and broken glass, but you are likely to be remembered as 'that fabulous beautiful

¹⁸ Ibid 9.

¹⁹ Op-cit, Modjeska 17

bitch' as Jack Lindsay fondly recalled, or, 'the Queen of all bitches', as Ray Lindsay gallantly expressed it, who enters the annals of history as a 'Gutter Venus' who in Rays poetic prose was 'one of those Women-one-could-have-but-never -did-fuck'²⁰.

There were other women with less tragic tales. Dulcie Deamer was a writer who was crowned Queen of Bohemia rather than Queen of the Underworld as Anne Brennan became known. Deamer came into the male literary circle more protected than Anne, as she had the safe patronage Frank Morton, editor of *Triad*. As a result she appears to have been less vulnerable. She was the ultimate flapper and flirted her way to popularity, famously wearing only a dog's tooth necklace and leopard skin to the Artists Ball in 1923. Peter Kirkpatrick in his account of the time, *The Seacoast of Bohemia*, notes however that while Deamer was taken seriously as a bohemian, she was never taken seriously as a writer. And when she lost her sexual appeal, she lost her only draw card. When she tried the same trick of the leopard skin at the 1950s Ball, there was no applause. Only mocking laughter at the sight of a sixty-year-old woman in ridiculous attire.

And what if one didn't choose respectable isolation, or used one's sex for attention?

What if one chose a different path? If one refused to pay attention to the misogyny of the time? Then you could become a poet like Zora Cross, penning passionate love poems, expressing herself and female sexuality without men as the reference point. The literary circle made quick work of her. Jack Lindsay does express some regret now,

We treated her rather as a joke...it seems to me that we should have taken her seriously as a woman trying to express her sexual being²¹.

Zora was ridiculed to the point where she stopped expressing her own erotic self and began the safer task of writing poetry for children. Given that whore, flirt or repressed poet may not necessarily be our prime choice as a writer, let us move on a little further.

²⁰ Peter Kirkpatrick, *The Seacoast of Bohemia: Literary Life in Sydney's Roaring Twenties*, (St Lucia, Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 1992) 225.

²¹ Op-cit, Modjeska 21.

1930 and the depression's hit, politically there is tension between socialists and fascists and the party is well and truly over. You take off your flapper dress and put on something a little more sober. Despite the downturn in economics, the 1930s in Australia is a peak time in women's writing. Women are producing the best fiction of the period and publishing in greater quantities, helped also by the Prime Minister increasing tariffs to boost the depression, enabling publishers to compete with British imports. Almost half of the Australian novels written between 1928 and 1939 are by women. Geoffrey Serle on the Australian writing scene of the thirties states:

Another feature of the period was the prominence of women novelists; however unconventional one's taste or ranking it would be almost impossible to deny that most of the best novelists were women²².

Nettie Palmer, the writer and critic who observed the lack of support for women in the last decade, has been working hard and established an independent network of women writers, known as Nettie's Network. These included Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Eleanor Dark, Katherine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny. Through Nettie's supportive letters, advice, criticism and contacts, she helped create a community for women living in oppressive and isolated conditions. It is still a hostile climate for women writers, as Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw said:

There are of course, people who say they do not care for books by women and who elevate their principles to a prejudice²³.

At a talk in 1933 on the 'feminisation of literature' by the Fellowship of Australian Writers, Kenneth Wilkinson said:

Women cannot stand outside their emotions in writing as men can; they are apt to get carried away or ramble on for a while²⁴.

As his colleague, Frank Davison agreed, it was the woman with the masculine mind who really succeeded intellectually²⁵.

²² Gulla Guiffré, *To be Australian, a Woman and a Writer*, (Sydney, University of Sydney, 1987) 7.

²³ Dale Spender, *Writing a New World: Two Centuries of Australian Women Writers*, (London, Pandora Press, 1988), 240.

²⁴ Op-cit, Brooks, 259.

²⁵ Op-cit, Modjeska, 9.

So say you are one of the fortunate ones involved in Nettie's network. You would then be able to correspond with some of the most prominent women writers of the time. You may receive a letter from Marjorie Barnard talking about her difficulty in finding the confidence to establish a room of her own in the form of a flat with Flora Eldershaw, outside the confines of life as the spinster daughter caring for her elderly parents. Her letter reads:

There's a lot of life banked up in me, rather painfully. In other words, I don't know if I'm worth this upheaval, even finding out if I can stand finding out I'm not²⁶.

Or one may receive a letter from Eleanor Dark, whose position as a doctor's wife meant she was constantly interrupted by the phone, which could not be left unattended. Her letter states:

My books have been written at intervals snatched from years as a housewife²⁷.

Or one from Katherine Susannah Prichard, whose involvement in political activity for the communist party was combined with being a mother and wife, saying:

Sometimes, I'm sure I work harder than any body in the world²⁸.

Katherine Prichard was very isolated in Perth, where she had married a man who tried but had no understanding of her writing. She was taken more seriously as Jimmy's wife than as a writer. And then there is Jean Devanny, a writer who saw politics and her role in the communist party as a cause worth every ounce of her energy. In her writing and as a member of the party, she pushed the rights of women to be accepted and to have equal sexual freedom. You will not get a letter from her that describes in detail the charges that were brought against her in 1940 for lurid sexual activities. Charges that were mounted by the party to discredit her when she tried to expose exploitive sexual misconduct by male members. You may hear though about her bitterness at being expelled from the party and being spurned by friends and comrades.

Perhaps you may even get a letter from Nettie herself, commenting on the pressure of domestic demands:

²⁶ Ibid, 78.

²⁷ Op-cit, Brooks, 150.

²⁸ Op-cit, Modjeska, 158.

I've been washing and charring and I've got lectures twice soon and write some regular articles for Stead's and elsewhere and sew some pants for Aileen and arrange some Pioneer rehearsals...²⁹

For all her support of women writers, Nettie spent much of her energy, financially, domestically and creatively supporting the writing of her own husband, Vance Palmer. When she was younger she had ambitions to be a poet, saying she would write 'sky splitting' poems. Her poetry became something that was laughed at to entertain the children. Her own confidence came to rest on her husband as apparent in a letter to him in 1930:

You are better and greater than I am in every way...it is because I believe in you, your character, your work, your future, that I find it so hard to believe I am of importance to you³⁰.

Vance Palmer, on the subject of writing women did not return the respect. In an article he wrote in 1926 for *The Bulletin* called 'Women and the novel', he stated:

Writing a novel seems as easy to almost any literate woman as making a dress³¹.

Nettie, the lynchpin in this network of women was herself prone to bouts of terrible self-doubt. What will become clear as you receive their letters is the chronic lack of confidence and the amazing feat it is, that these women manage to churn out the writing they do, given the obstacles, anxiety and demands on their time. All whilst contending with sexist criticism of their work along the lines of a response Eleanor Dark received for *The Timeless Land*.

It was a big subject and you tackled it with masculine frankness and virility of language³².

This network of women corresponded well beyond the thirties into the forties and fifties. When the war broke out in 1935, many of these women experienced a block in their writing. Rising feminist ideas became overshadowed by battle. Just as a peak in women's writing had hit, world events took over and women were left silenced

²⁹ Ibid, 196.

³⁰ Ibid, 201.

³¹ Op-cit, Spender, 1988, 248.

³² Op-cit, Brooks, 358.

and once again in the background. As part of the network now, one would be receiving accounts of a widespread paralysis among the women writers. As Eleanor Dark expresses it:

There should be floods of stuff being produced. But there is something paralysing about all this waste and horror³³.

Silence was in fact a reaction felt by many Australian writers. It was a condition that persisted through the forties and fifties. Between censorship, ASIO and the threat of nuclear war, times were tough. Propaganda and counter propaganda created suspicion and fear.

'Language is failing us', Dark declared,

Words have become nothing more than noise. Nobody trusts the written word³⁴.

As Clem Christensen, the editor of *Meanjinn* wrote to Miles Franklin in 1953:

Not writing seems to be the occupational disease of Australian writers³⁵.

Many writers such as Charmian Clift and George Johnston went overseas to escape the suffocating conservatism of the Menzies era. There were still writers writing of course, but the cultural ground had shifted. Literature was now in the domain of universities. Pressured to be conservative by a conservative government, literature departments adopted a European approach that removed writing from its' social context. It was called 'New Criticism' and it dismissed the idea of looking at politics and the social background in a novel. Women writers were relegated to 'the back shelves of Australian Literature'³⁶. The universities were dominated by men, and their selection of masculine authored texts and a masculine view of history would influence the schools, research, criticism and what novels were acclaimed, elevated and reprinted for decades to come. For instance, children are still not taught in schools about the great women writers of the thirties. In fact most would never have heard of them. If one lists these women's names, one may well

³³ *Ibid*, 261.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 379.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 400.

³⁶ *Op-cit*, Modjeska, 31.

receive a blanket of blank looks. Women's novels such as Elizabeth Harrower's *The Watchtower*, published in 1966, reflect the stagnation and desperation felt by women locked into a cycle of silence and dependency. Harrower's character Clare, is literally so trapped by her situation, her only escape is to withdraw masochistically into herself:

In her own way she would be free. In the only way she would outreach them. She would go so far in damaging herself that they could never hope to touch her³⁷.

Which is why I recommend head straight to the revolution, or the partial revolution that was the seventies. How much it altered universities is debatable, but it was certainly a turning point for women's writing. So get out the flares and the Dillon or in this context Helen Redding. It is 1970. You find yourself at a Vietnam rally and behold the poet, Kate Jennings, challenging the crowd with this little poem.

watch out! You may meet a real

castrating female

or

you'll say I'm a manhating braburning

lesbian member of the castration

penisenvy brigade, which I am³⁸

Second wave feminism and women are angry and making strides in getting heard. They are shortcutting the masculine gateways of publishing and printing. Women's presses such as Sybylla are starting up. Women's publishing companies such as McPhee and Gribble take root in the shadows of the corporate publishing companies, doing things differently to the male establishment. In McPhee and Gribble's case this means literally two women with babies in tow in a one-room office. Women's magazines like *MeJane* and *Refractory Girl* print women's words that do not rely on or seek male approval. The traditional social and historical conditioning that had kept women isolated and competing

³⁷ Elizabeth Harrower, *The Watchtower*, (London, Angus & Robertson, 1966) 95.

³⁸ Anne Summers, *Ducks on the Pond: An autobiography 1945-1976*, (Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin, 2000), 267.

for privileges handed down by patriarchy is being shattered. Women are swapping stories. The chant of the women's movement, that the personal is political, means a move towards experiential writing - a reaction against centuries of women's experiences being dismissed as unworthy of a place as 'real' literature. Women who had never dreamed of being authors begin to speak. As you walk around the rallies and consciousness raising groups in the mid seventies, you may come across a collection of poetry called *Mother I'm Rooted*. It has poems sent in by women, some writing for the very first time. You flip through it and read poems about the intoxication and freedom of women's marches with lines like...

My first march – the first time I yelled for what I want-The first time I knew, could no longer doubt, The power of women – My first March – It will not be my last.

Back to the place I still call 'home' – the place where two people I love are –

But the place where, increasingly of late, less and less of my hopes and dreams are centred – to worried husband: 'Where the hell have you been all day?'

Crying kid (had she missed me?), unwashed dishes – 'Real life' again. Nothing really changed.

And yet, and yet...I'd been given something by my sisters, some glimpse of what might be, must be, WILL be one day, For our great great grand-daughters, if not for us³⁹.

Women are fighting to get women's studies into universities and women authors back on the agenda. Thea Astley said in an interview with Jennifer Ellison that in her day, the 1950's:

Men didn't listen to women when they expressed an opinion. I always felt they wouldn't read books written by women, because it would be like listening to a woman for three hours and that would be intolerable. And when I started to write I knew I had things going on in my brain and I'd have little opinions about things, but I knew they didn't rate, and I didn't know what voice to write as you see, it wasn't popular ...to talk about menstruation or periods or the angst of

³⁹ Judy Gemmel, 'One woman's march' in *Mother I'm Rooted: An Anthology of Australian Women Poets*, ed. Kate Jennings, (Fitzroy, Victoria, Outback Press, 1975), 187-191.

having children. That was just a step above Ethell M Dell or Mills and Boon and I felt I had been spiritually neutered⁴⁰.

Susan Lever in *Real Relations, The Feminist Politics of Form in Australian Fiction*, observes that pre 1977 was a harsh climate from women writers and that it seemed as if women felt the need to be 'ladylike' and controlled in order to win respect – in writing as well as sexual behaviour. Then in 1977, Helen Garner came out with *Monkey Grip*, a revolutionary novel as it splayed the guts of women's experiences, sexual and personal for all to see. Lever states that women writers from Thea Astley to Carmel Bird say that Garner's novel made a difference in the possibilities for their own writing. The notions of what women could write expanded ⁴¹.

Riding on the waves of this revolution, the 1980s exhibit a rise in the popularity of women writers. They are getting published, sold, topping the charts. But the masculine literary elite isn't going to be overshadowed so easily. Dale Spender describes how they made serious suggestions that there was a female conspiracy, that women had 'organised' and cornered the market and were buying books only written by their own sex.

As if the only way to account for the success of women writers is in terms of some sort of plot or ploy!⁴²

The backlash against feminism is in full swing. The upshot of all this cultural movement though is that the questions raised are not going to be silenced. The 'unnamed' have got their foot in the door. In the nineties, women's writing such as Mary Fallon's *Working Hot*, in which women twist language to claim their own desires, mirror the diversity and challenging expression of a post-modern feminist perspective. Race, culture, class and gender - all these fault lines are cracking up the smooth exterior of the white male heterosexual norm. So here we find ourselves, just over the cusp of the millennium. We may take a brief rest. We have come to the end of our time travel in the guise of a woman writer for now. It is the beginning though of the journey for many young women writers, starting to find their voice. What is the context for young women writing in Australia now?

⁴⁰ Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own*, (Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin, 1986), 56.

⁴¹ Susan Lever, *Real Relations: The Feminist Politics of Form in Australian Fiction*, (Sydney, Halstead Press, 2000) 106-107.

⁴² Op-cit, Spender, 1988, 295.

Contemporary Australian women writers are experimenting with technique and form. They are explorative and exciting. The poet Dorothy Porter traverses sexuality and gender fearlessly in works such as *Akhenaten* (1992) and *The Monkey's Mask* (1994). Kate Grenville, author of the novels *Lillian's Story* (1985), *Joan Makes History* (1988) and *Dark Places* (1994), portrays the western outsider's perspective with skill and insight. Melissa Lucashenko, in fiction such as *Steam Pigs* (1997) and *Hard Yards* (1999) gives us the grit without the gloss of Indigenous oppression. The playwright, Hannie Rayson brings a woman's perspective into the male dominated theatre scene with her plays, *Hotel Sorrento* (1990), *Life After George* (2000) and *Inheritance* (2003) and there are so many others, all out in the public eye, far from attic rooms, bell jars and watchtowers, showing that despite most of the 'greats' and 'geniuses' taught still being men, it is 'natural' for a woman to be a writer.

Contemporary women writers are looking outside boxes and lines, outside gender and time. Women have always done so as they skirt along the margins but the odds have been such that it was often either not passed on, nor written or it suffered from oppressive conditions. What are we conditioned by now? Is the dominant paradigm like a virus that can adapt to exist in more resistant conditions? Are we still a reaction or are we now mainstream? Are we close to disregarding all categories and embracing our 'humanity' or is that for our great great-grand daughters? Who is 'we' exactly and what will the term 'woman' come to represent?

Liza Frazer-Gooda, one of the women Leah Purcell chats to in *Black Chicks Talking* says she is not a poet but every now and then gets this urge to write. Her words below, reflect not only gender oppression but racial oppression and the effects of colonisation on Indigenous women in this country, for while we have traversed in the guise of a woman writer, she has been white and middle-class for these were predominantly the women who managed to write at all. Despite 'skating on thin paper', our 'woman writer' has had far more opportunities and privileges than Indigenous, working-class and migrant women among others. As far as travelling through 'herstory' and learning the lessons of the past, there is so much more to see and hear through the voices of those who have their own stories to share. As Frazer-Gooda writes,

Free me from this sorrow and anger that has been passed
onto me from generation to generation. Release me!

Let me fly away from this entrapment into a new beginning, a
new century. The twenty first century.

I want to feel my ancestor's spirits beckoning me to spread
my wings⁴³.

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Contemporary Australian Short Narratives - An Indian Reader's Perception

S.K.Sareen

If the Aboriginal history of recounting short narratives were to be taken into account Australia's tradition of story telling would go back to 30,000 years but if we consider only white Australia history then it is a recent tradition that begins with the publication of Henry Lawson's short stories in the *Bulletin* - the first journal of Australia to include literary writing - in the nineteenth century (the 1890's). In India, on the other hand, we have a long tradition of story-telling, extending from its rich oral tradition of folktales, ranging from the puranic tales, the Yoga Vashishta, the Kathasaritsagar, the Pancatantra, and romantic and heroic narratives, including those from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to the narratives of today voicing contemporary issues. A positive thing about the tradition of story telling in Australia, even if we take the genre seriously only from the 1890's, is that compared to the West it attaches greater weight to the genre of the short story, distinguishes itself by shedding Western European inheritance and paves a different charter for new world literatures. (See Bruce Bennett, 1991-92). Thus, with Henry Lawson itself begins the distinctive tradition of providing alternative to English literary traditions and we find the genre flourishing in Australia, which can be testified by the sheer number of short story anthologies published from Australia.

Though the common thing about the art of story-telling is that it involves construction of situations that the reader could enjoy and that fall within the structure of his own experience, emotions and responses, the modes of thought and perception vary from one culture to another. How does one culture perceive the stories of another culture vis-à-vis its own tradition of story telling? What insight and knowledge does it contribute to the reader/s of the other culture/s? Does it authenticate an understanding of Australia - the land, the people, the environment and the culture? These and related questions shall form the focus of the present paper. Since the stories discussed here have been selected for an anthology of contemporary Australian short narratives proposed to be published for the Indian students and the general reading public, the reaction of the scholars

participating in the Interactions Conference from various parts of the world to Indian and other non-Australian readers' construction will help understand better the dynamics of the Australian stories selected. These have been selected from a large corpus as representative, suitable and pertinent by a cross-section of research scholars at Jawaharlal Nehru University, including a Commonwealth Fellowship scholar from Kenya, to form and authenticate an understanding of Australia.

The first story we look at is Glenda Adams *Lies* for it is the very art of story-telling that is discussed here. Narration is natural to humans and this narration incorporates concoction, whether deliberate or not. A story-teller imagines as well as fantasises things. Josephine and Uncle Roger are two such story-tellers. Mother knows this yet when her own jealousy is aroused over Roger's attentions to their neighbour, Maxine, she would rather believe, nay encourage concoction, from Josephine leading to expulsion of Uncle Roger, the other skilled story-teller from the family. Morality gets at a low ebb and she encourages her daughter to admit that Uncle Roger has been pawing and hugging her. Josephine is in complete grasp of the situation and does the obliging act, not because she loves Uncle Roger less but because she is a compulsive story-teller. As a matter of fact when her teacher at school asks the children to write about their families she promptly imagines herself as part of a family consisting of Roger, her mother and her sister while her father forms a family unit with Maxine, and the new-born brother she finds hard to accept. The teacher is fascinated by her art of story-telling though she warns her against such fantasising. It is an important aspect of story-telling that is theorised here. The dividing line between the two, the real and the fantastical, can really be thin and indiscernible at times. This is something universal to all cultures and it becomes particularly interesting when it comes from a child in a world torn by marital discords. Fantasy can be purely entertaining, too, as in the case of Frank Hardy's *The Miraculous Cricket Bat* where cricket lovers may enjoy the mere fantasy of a bat scoring runs endlessly for a tail-ender. Such tales of invisible agency have endless fascination for all readers.

The new multi-cultural societies, like Australia, offer exciting opportunities to people willing to venture out to seeming havens and Judith Waten's *Mother* is a classic of socialist realism where 'social memory' and autobiographical memory get intertwined in the

act of the family leaving their home and coming to live in a new cultural context. The endurance of such migrants, who belong to the suffering/oppressed working class which doesn't despair at the oppression but maintains a strong, positive note of hope, is brought out in this story. The story is significant in that it voices concerns, multiculturalism, ethnicity and women, which were to later occupy a central position in the realist tradition of story-telling that has a place even in the wake of the modernistic mode. This realism is important for those belonging to other cultures for we get here a viewpoint of the other.

The tyrannies of life can be felt as much by those who belong to the land but yet have not overcome the nostalgia for the old mother country, "where the world was, where things happened...where history was". Elizabeth Harrower's *The Beautiful Climate*, reveals the realist who focuses on the extraordinary tyrannies of contemporary urban and suburban life. The family of three, consisting of mother, father and an eighteen year old daughter bear the domination and vagrant moods of the male, Victor Shaw, the archetypal taciturn man, for whom "happiness is nothing but the absence of unpleasantness". She curbs her desire to protest and if ever any complaining is done it is in "permissible limits, the complaints of a prisoner-of-war to the camp-commandant". When Shaws visit their island holiday home week-ends become a dread for even in his best of moods Mr. Shaw is 'a friendly lion' whose ire can never be predicted.

The consciousness changes in the women's movement can be witnessed in writers such as Jean Bedford and Olga Masters. Jean Bedford's *Country Girl Again* deals with physical love to the point that love affairs or romance instead of being discreet or secretive finds an open expression. This brings to the fore values that the Asian and African counterparts may find as new, changing and those that in their openness may seem to some as socially unacceptable. Anne's relationship is at the verge of breaking and she contemplates an abortion of her second child, keeping it a secret from Terry, her husband, as it would bind her to him. Yet the possibility of Terry having an extra-marital relationship with Carol makes her feel jealous even to the point of envying his freedom to spend time with her. Terry is understanding enough even to the point of asking her to go to town over the weekend while he agrees to look after their little daughter so that she can get over her 'Springtime

depression'. Once in town away from the outback she is not too happy at her own sexual freedom but decides to have her abortion. The freedom that her husband gave her helps her to take her decision without the need to share this information with him. It is her way of winning back her 'freedom', of being a country girl again. Indian and African societies can perhaps be exposed to such concepts of freedom but they are not likely to appreciate this point of view. What would be almost taboo are the sex experiences of young girls as described in Olga Masters *The Home Girls* or voyeurism in sex as in Michael Wilding's *Her Most Bizarre Sexual Experience*. The Home girls caught up in their world of violence, lack of home and affection, a world that is untidy, dirty, and full of obscenities, are misfits in Hilda's sisters' house. The helpless foster mother hands them over to another set of parents, while the girls live in their make-believe fantasy world. This writing is influenced by the 1960s contemporary American writing and is practically devoid of any moral dimensions. What we get is "fragmented impressions" (Kostelanetz) with barely any narrative skill prompted by the "common concern for innovation and experiment" (Laurie Hergenhan, 1984). It caters mainly to the new young readership as it challenges sexual censorship by being open and indiscreet in personal relationships, making the city the centre point as distinct from the stories dealing with bush environment and values.

We find the expression of anguish, comedy, fantasy in several stories that we thought should be included in our anthology as in reflecting the particularities of the Australian situation they would also appeal for the universality in them. David Malouf's *Bad Blood*, for instance, begins with :

Odd the conjunctions, some of them closer than any planet, that govern a life.

The story of Uncle Jake's life is located in Brisbane in 'the middle Thirties' when the society was raked by crimes that 'defy judgment because they defy understanding'. He is a very likeable person, full of adventure stories, and both mother and father are indulgent towards him so much so that once his 'law abiding father had had to go to a politician, and the politician to an inspector of police, to save Uncle Jake from his just deserts'. His 'animal spirits' had their bright side to it as well particularly when as a very young

man he was an apprentice pastry cook and around twenty had married Alice, two years older to him. She is beautiful but can neither manage the house for him nor look after their baby girl and this makes him fret '*for his old life of careless independence*'. The death of their little daughter from whooping cough makes him '*wild with grief*' and is the end of his marriage and uncle Jake reverts to his '*original wildness*'.

The narrator's mother has always suffered from the fear of Uncle Jake's bad influence on the child, and '*resented his idleness, his charm, his showy clothes, and the demands he made on my father*' and did not go for a second child lest the children turn out to be like their uncle but when she feels confident that the child has '*escaped contagion*' she even grows fond of him and nurses him like a baby. As Malouf concludes : *It's odd how these things turn out.*

We have another child narrator, aged seven to be precise, in Beverley Farmer's *Among Pigeons*. The child, part of a broken family, misses his father and awaits the week-ends, later fortnightly visits, when the father takes him to the movies or the park and McDonalds. He refuses to accept Uncle David/Luke or the other men that frequent their home and is shocked to find her mother one day in the bath with that man, who can relate neither to him nor the pigeons that are part of the house. The mother finally has him turned out of the house when his teasing extends to the point of physically hurting the child. He treats the child as he treats the pigeons and both his acts are inhuman. We get in these stories different dimensions of childhood which touch on children's sensitivity. Another story by Gillian Mears, *Afterthoughts*, (part of a larger sequence-*Fineflour*), evokes a small Australian village again through a child's consciousness.

Even as adults we like to recollect our childhood. Herb Wharton in *Cockatoos, Oranges and the Past* does exactly this beginning his narrative thus :

It's strange how the past sometimes seems to come back to haunt us mortals in strange and mysterious ways.

These past nostalgic experiences of the author are universal in their appeal and important in sketching the change that has taken

place in a fifty year span. The author rooted in the place where the sweetest oranges were grown but difficult to pluck because of the talking cockatoo has now to spend a fortune to buy sour oranges that he throws after only a bite at the birds. Another unusual recollection, fit subject for another story, though mentioned only in the passing is about the author alongwith other Murri Aborigine kids being the only Aborigine tribe to capture a white boy.

The Aborigine stories hold a special interest and form units of significance that go beyond the white foundation of Australia. *Bara, the Sun Maidens* by Joe Nangan and Hugh Edwards speaks of history in dreamtime. This would satisfy both the Indian preoccupation with history as well as its concepts of time and space as found in myths permeated with religion and psychical connotations. The Aborigine myths are in themselves ways of looking at existential questions often in the form of explanations. If we see these in contrast to Peter Cowan's *Tractor*, discussed earlier, they point to the past and the present condition of Aborigines, that is, if in the myths they are the hunters and the aggressors in the *Tractor* they have become the hunted and the oppressed. The hunter 'fine strong man', in Paddy Roe's *Worawora Woman* has to decapitate the Worawora woman because she would not allow him to take 'tucker' for his two wives that they obtain by hunting together. She is confined neither in space nor in her feminine pursuits and becomes a threat to his family. This story, too, is based in a dreamtime myth that reads like an Aboriginal legend. The issue of Aborigine integration to mainstream Australia, a multicultural society, is taken up in Frank Hardy's *That Aboriginal myths are part of Australian folklore*. As explained in the story, Musquito, the Aborigine's reaction to the hanging sentence reveals the 'gap between the two cultures':

although executions were useful amongst the white people...whò understood the reason of men being thus punished as examples for others, his execution was useless as an example to the Aborigines.

This self reflexivity gives a well rounded view of the issues confronting the absorption of the Aborigine into white Australia. The Aborigine living in their society networks still are subjected to two laws - the white man's law and the Aborigine law.

The white men who took the credit for founding the land, for laying its foundations and bearing the hardships were the pioneers



and to capture this pioneering history we have included Judith Wright's *The Weeping Fig*. A lonely housewife condemned to 'the abomination of desolation' entertains a stranger at tea. He is interested in the old homestead and the land and listens to her tales of woe of being out there. Bertha, the old housekeeper, an Aborigine half-caste is the sole recounter of history. She is one of the old order, a chronicler in the eyes of the young man. From the annals of a diary, he rescues fragments of memory of a past age. The old fig tree near the homestead is a symbolic representation of Bertha, the human chronicler. It was planted by Ellen, the young man's great grandmother. It stood guardian over a young girl and a baby boy's grave till finally Ellen was herself buried beneath it. In a memorable concluding section the young man imagines the blood of his forefathers giving life/sustenance to the old fig tree that is still healthy, vital and green despite the withering landscape and the passage of time.

If we go back in time it is the bush story/yarn that celebrated the theme of mateship that was masculine in its outlook and presented a reversal of the pioneering spirit. The narrated, as against the constructed, stories of Henry Lawson use sentences full of nouns, are sparse of adjectives and are without verbs - verbs when discovered are in the existential mode - to present a country of disconnections and discontinuities :

*Bush all round - bush with no horizon, for the country is flat.
No ranges in the distance... No undergrowth. Nothing to
relieve the eye...*

As David Campbell points out the nature of the Australian bush is such that it leads simultaneously to the surreal. It draws the reader into sympathetic recognition of the bush.

Strictly speaking, an anthology of contemporary Australian short stories may not have place for bush stories but due to their historical positioning in the genre and also given the fact that they continue to be anthologised we include here one short story, *The Squeaker's Mate* by Barbara Baynton.

Baynton differs from Henry Lawson in her unrelieved focus on the women of the bush. Her concern is their endurance and resourcefulness compared to Lawson's sympathetic treatment of them though the ambivalence of the woman's positioning is

suggested by the title of the story itself which refers to her only as a mate. The story concentrates on the tragic loss of bush capability by the squeaker's mate, commonly agreed to be '*the best long-haired mate that ever stepped in petticoats*'. Her back is broken by a falling branch, and she is permanently deprived of movement, independence and usefulness but retains her will which she uses to terrible effect in wreaking vengeance, aided by her faithful dog, on squeaker's selfish new mate and on the weak-willed sniveling squeaker himself. The ending is bitter and violent. Squeaker's mate draws the new woman to her like a tigress holding her prey; the squeaker returns and beats off the relentless tightening arms with a pole; then the dog savages the squeaker. We find here a questioning of the neglect of woman, as a matter of fact of many things taken for granted. Her strength really turns into weakness because of the absence of the feminine aspect in her and her over-indulgence. In contrast, the new mate is able to make him work. In the end we find her femininity restored and asserted and she achieves a fullness in her revenge.

The major theoretical question that such stories raise is about the appropriateness or propriety of subject matter. This was specifically discussed by Longinus in the Western tradition but Longinus's master is Aristotle who talked about the need for grand themes and advocated, therefore, the life of the great princes as an appropriate subject. In the Indian tradition Kshemendra in his *auchitya siddhanta* much more directly argues the same point of view - that there are some subjects that are fit and appropriate and there are some that are not fit and appropriate for literary representation. It does not mean that you deny the reality or existence of those things (the ugly and the dirty). It only means that literature is not an end in itself - it must be a part of the larger social philosophic goals of the community. A subtle treatment of the love theme including physical love and love outside marriage can be encountered in Ninetta Dutton's *The Black Stone*. Love here is not mere physical lust even if it assumes a physical dimension for it grows out of the situation and there seems to be no blame attached to it. The protagonist is under the strain of her husband's sickness when circumstances draw her close to a historian of 'Aboriginal blood'. Soon after her husband dies and symbolically she buries her brief love encounter by dropping the small black stone that the Aborigine had presented to her. Only she can understand the sound, the little

ripple that it created in her life but the fact of her life is the grief that has befallen her by her husband's death which she has yet "to know". Such sentiments are universal and universally appreciated.

The theme of love/sringara rasa as presented by Bhoja, the Indian poetician, in the tenth/eleventh century in *Sringara-Prakasa* still holds sway - Sringara rasa/love is the dominant central experience that subsumes all other rasa. The theme of love is manifold - it manifests as love of (i) life/living, (ii) nature, (iii) woman, (iv) death, and even (v) sorrow. This theme predominates in the entire South-Asian region because the shared goal of literature here is delight - evocation in the reader of rasa or sensuous states of mind built around emotions - and love and beauty are the central experiences knit in an effect-cause relationship with all other states of mind. The eight possible psychological / experiential states are : a sense or experience of (i) beauty, (ii) comedy, (iii) sorrow, (iv) anger, (v) courage, (vi) the fearsome, (vii) the loathsome and (viii) the marvellous. To this Abhinavagupta later in his commentary on the Rasa-Sutra, added the ninth rasa, the santa rasa, the sense or experience of deep, all-pervading peace.

What literature does is to evoke these experiential states and reconstruct them in the reader's mind. That is what we find in Ninetta Dutton's story or even a dramatised story such as Alan Marshall's *Kiss Her? - I'd Kiss Her!* Here the narrator frees the exploited and terrified girl from the clutches of the spruiker by deciding to marry her. It is love at first sight and such emotion is evoked in him that he decides to marry her though he doesn't even know her name. It is to help her get over the grief that she is unable to express.

Of the several experiential states discussed above we find a treatment of *the fearsome* in another of Alan Marshall's story, *Trees Can Speak*, selected for our anthology project. Laurie Hergenhan says that it is a "lyrical, delicately elusive story, yet it deals with his favourite social theme of victims reaching out towards a sense of the community of struggling human beings" while Michael Wilding says that it is in the "realist mode from which the spare clarity of a fable emerges and the man of few words takes his place amidst the Wordsworthian and Beckettian varieties of the archetype". This is a story which like Judah Waten's *Mother* has been much anthologised. The handicapped miner whom the narrator/author accompanies down the shaft becomes so much part of the deep earth that he

seems to have lost the power of speech. It is Marshall's interest of underworld dangers that rouses him. The disability is tackled as a social problem in communication. Overall it affirms faith in the goodness of man and the victims reveal potential humanity through the sympathy and affirmation between people. The creativity of the writer here is based on his personal experience in facing infantile paralysis. His silence has assumed such a power that when he waves a hand to the miner it is as if a tree had spoken. This is a story of real grief.

Yet another experiential state that finds expression here is the love for nature. The society faces a conflict since modern development brings resistance from the lone Aborigine as in Peter Cowan's *The Tractor*. The tractor is the symbol of the destruction that development has brought about in nature and people - the Aborigines. Fortunately, there are those who can see the Aborigine point of view, for example, the environmentalist in the story. The average Indian reader brought up in the tradition would empathise completely brought up as he is to respect and adore all forms of life, including the biological and the zoological not making any distinction between 'man and beast' or between 'girl and creeper'. The genre of the story has been used to deal with such themes - at times providing documentary revelation through the expression of anguish, comedy or even fantasy. Coupled with the love for nature is the love for land. Elizabeth Jolley in *A Gentleman's Agreement*, a contemporary version of a bush story, depicts an old man's love for his 87 acre land that is now lying fallow, overgrown with weeds but which he is not ready to part with even though his daughter works as a house maid to make both ends meet. The plot of land is the old man's life line and it is the same for his grandson, who too is most happy when taking care of the farm. After the death of the man the woman is compelled to sell the land but manages to outwit the Doctor who purchases the land through a gentleman's agreement that he would allow the planting of one crop. She decides to plant a Jarrah forest, thereby ensuring that the land would remain with them besides of course the money that they have already got for it. It is a story that endears the writer to one and all, brilliant in its execution, extreme clarity and sparsity of language.

The values that are upheld in the stories help form 'our' concept of the Australian way of life in its multifarious aspects, touching on issues that are not merely local but global, wider than

merely particular and specific. The values of sexual morality may be problematic for us but in the western history itself Sodom and Gomorrah invite God's wrath because of a given sexual morality. Therefore, it seems western mind itself is always arguing against that symbolism.

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'How British are we?'

Andrew Hassam

I first heard David Malouf express his belief that Shakespeare was the greatest Australian writer when he was in Dublin in July 1996. The audience was amused, mostly, I imagine, because they found the claim whimsical rather than contentious. The occasion was a conference on Australian Identities, a topic that for years has drawn flocks of Australian academics and artists overseas to inform each other who they are, as though being Australian is less complicated overseas. Malouf's long, ruminative essay *Made in England: Australia's British Inheritance* is an expansion of the syllogism implicit in his argument in Dublin: Shakespeare is the greatest writer in the English language; Australians write in the English language; therefore, Shakespeare is the greatest Australian writer. Malouf's contribution to the Quarterly Essay series, despite its veneration of English literature, is less whimsical and his preface intriguingly juxtaposes past and present in the account of his visit to the Folger Shakespeare Library in a post-September-2001 Washington. Beneath ground level, almost below the White House itself, Malouf is permitted to handle some of the priceless original editions of Shakespeare held in the library's vaults. In this hallowed space, the librarian confirms Malouf's sense that this is the real centre of the city, the 'sacred texts' that are the embodiment of a culture that extends across the entire English-speaking world, 'the spirit of the language we share'.

Malouf is more comfortable in the 1940s and 1950s, the period of his childhood and the last period in which Australians could claim, without embarrassment, to be both Australian and British. Malouf conjures up a Proustian *temps perdu* from his Brisbane childhood of Early Kookas, Golden Syrup pudding and Milk of Magnesia. This is a British colonial world, a less fractured and more homogeneous world, according to Malouf, a world in which loyalty to things British, to what had been 'Made in England', was a loyalty to Australia. 'Yorkshire pudding was Australian. It was what we had always eaten. What else could it be?'

Yet beneath the surface of Milk of Magnesia and Yorkshire pudding, a world he has often evoked in his fiction and memoirs, Malouf locates a more enduring truth. Down in the vaults of the 1940s and 1950s, next to Shakespeare and the English language, is to be found a lost tolerance of cultural difference. As Malouf's father, of Lebanese Catholic background, sang English and Irish and Scots songs, so British culture itself was an eclectic mix of influences and loyalties. Where others associate the days of White Australia with cultural intolerance, Malouf credits his father's British inheritance for his acceptance that other people had different ideas and beliefs: 'What a man chose to believe and devote his life to was his own affair. Part of the ethos—and this was so deeply British as to be essentially Australian—was that you did not interfere.' Unlike other versions of the 1950s, Malouf is appealing to a national consciousness that was not parochial, that did not force a choice between one loyalty and another. You could be British, of Lebanese descent and Australian.

In the 1960s the economic and strategic bonds between Britain and Australia were abandoned, not by Australia but by Britain as Harold Macmillan sought membership of the European Common Market. Australians eventually made the best of it by claiming to be independent and consigning the more unpleasant aspects of their past to the dustbin of a British, rather than an Australian, history. Yet despite the development of multiculturalism, the excision of Britishness represents for Malouf a loss of loyalty to a broader community and a consequent lack of social coherence: 'The republic will be accepted because we need, as a society, to reinforce our bonds with one another, not break our bonds elsewhere.' Malouf here promises something new, a way of thinking about the British legacy as a force for coherence in a divided world, a way of making productive use of the nostalgia for a lost social coherence that seems to have become more insistent in recent years and in certain quarters.

Where John Howard looks to the British legacy for the basis of Australia's democracy and political stability, for Malouf the deeper legacy for Australia is the English language—one not tied to the political symbolism that Paul Keating despised:

We may treat Britain itself in any way we please. We may remove the Union Jack from our flag if it seems useful to do

so, and the Queen from our political life. What we cannot remove is the language we speak, and all that is inherent in it: a way of laying out experience, of seeing, that comes from the syntax, a body of half-forgotten customs, and events, fables, insights, jokes, that make up its idioms, a literature that belongs, since there is nothing that ties it mystically to one patch of soil, as much to the English-speaking reader in Perth, Australia as in Perth, Scotland.

By locating Britishness primarily within the English language, Malouf, as cosmopolitan poet and novelist, not only frees discussion of Australia's Britishness from contemporary Britain, he also puts his faith in a community that lies beyond the isolationism of a Pauline Hanson or a John Howard.

At the heart of that language, according to Malouf, is Shakespeare. Malouf is the most recent of a line of writers who, in uncertain times, have looked to Shakespeare as an exemplar of English political and social values. William Wordsworth invoked Shakespeare to denounce civil unrest in England:

We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held.
(‘It is not to be thought of, 1802)

The appeal to John Milton as well as to Shakespeare suggests that it is not the language alone but also certain liberal values that inform the ‘habit of mind’, as Malouf puts it, ‘we think of as being essentially and uniquely Anglo-Saxon’. Malouf himself links Milton to a pre-Enlightenment invective, one that was later moderated by reason. This, in turn, was the language inherited by Australia, and ‘created that peculiar mildness of social interaction here that has for more than two centuries now kept all kinds of extremism beyond the possibilities of acceptable public discourse and the worst sorts of violence at bay’. Malouf writes tenderly of his own father’s liberal ideals: ‘England represented all the things in the world he had grown up in that he most admired and lived by: fair play, decency, manliness, concern for the weak and helpless, a belief that life, in the end, was serious.’

That such an 'Anglo-Saxon habit of mind' made the British world moderate and tolerant seems too good to be true, and I think back to Malouf addressing that audience in Dublin. Would the Irish, invaded by the English, torn by civil war, and with their own literary canon, see it this way? The phrase 'Made In England' is not just a guarantee of quality stitched into underpants or printed on a box of matches, it is also an allusion to Shakespeare's imagined appeal by Henry V to his troops at Harfleur:

And you, good yeomen,

Whose limbs were made in England, show us here

The mettle of your pasture.

Peter Craven points out in his editorial introduction to Malouf's essay that Henry V's appeal is pan-British and is made not only to the English, but also to the Welsh and the Scots. Within the play this is true, but in the historical context of 1599 it is wishful thinking. It anticipates England's final subjugation of the other peoples of the British Isles rather than reflecting a Britain that had already been unified. To my mind, Malouf's evocation of Shakespeare is also expressing an English rather than a pan-British point of view.

Many Australians still tend to use the term 'England' in its nineteenth-century sense, as a synonym for Britain, a sense long lost within Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and it is only in this sense that the full title of Malouf's essay avoids contradiction. Malouf celebrates the diversity of Britishness and the cohesion of an Australia that grew out of a fusion of the English, the Irish, the Welsh and the Scots. But Shakespeare, as the Scots and the Irish will undoubtedly tell you, was English and not British, and in Britain it would be hard to sustain Malouf's discursive progress from Shakespeare to the English language to an Anglo-Saxon habit of mind to a pan-British culture. In this chronology, there is no sense that Shakespeare was fusing with anything, except perhaps later, and necessarily lesser, English writers. There is nothing Irish here, and where in this story of Britishness is the Scots language and the poetry of a near contemporary of Shakespeare, William Dunbar?

When English migrants stepped off the ships in the 1960s they found themselves being called 'whingeing Poms', and while they might have guessed the meaning of 'Pom', 'whinge' was meaningless to them. Few Australians at the time would have known

they were using Scots rather than English, but though Shakespeare had no knowledge of the word, Dunbar certainly did. Somehow the word 'whinge' migrated from Scotland to Ireland without reaching southern England and it then seems to have migrated to Australia in the 1930s from Dublin (James Joyce and Samuel Beckett both use it). Which is why I think that equating Shakespeare with Britishness in an Irish or Scots context risks imitating English Imperialism. Henry V's rallying cry at Harfleur was: 'God for Harry, England, and Saint Georget' Not a word for St Patrick or St Andrew.

I have a photograph of my grandfather's brother, Horace Styles, standing in front of a weatherboard house, a kangaroo skin stretched tight on the wall. He holds his shoulders back, as my grandfather did as he lit his pipe, and he would have shared my grandfather's Kentish accent. He came to Australia in the migration boom just prior to the First World War and, though the family lost touch with him, there are Australians today with whom I share great-grandparents. If in speaking English they share my Britishness, does that mean that in speaking English I share their Australianness? Such questions are a consequence of colonisation, and perhaps the title of Malouf's essay would have been better called 'Empire Made', a phrase familiar to me from the label on an old gardening coat hanging by the back door at my home in Wales, next to my grandfather's walking stick. In the aftermath of the British Empire, Malouf explores the rhetoric of empire, but he does so curiously from within rather than from without. There are no sketches here of life among today's indigenous and multicultural communities to match those of his childhood, and perhaps you need to have grown up in a particular culture at a particular time to imagine that the richness of experience in contemporary Australia might be contained in a Shakespearean allusion.

Ironically, given his advocacy of English literature, it is the literary nature of Malouf's essay that threatens his evocation of Britishness the most. This is not merely because his essay lacks linguistic evidence and/or a systematic argument; lack of evidence and argument is no obstacle to a forceful evocation of national sentiment. Made in England is woven together by that same associative use of language that Malouf argues is a fundamental trait of English: 'Other languages move by logic, English, as we see from even the most common idioms—a "tower of strength", "a dog's breakfast"—by association.' The problem lies in his choice of 'the family' as a figure

of speech: 'The family link is English, our shared language, and all that goes with it.' This attracts me as one who shares a language with my great-uncle's descendants in Australia, yet I am also discomfited by the degree to which I want to believe in it. I am suspicious of the appeal to family, and talk of a shared language as a 'family' link comes dangerously close to that figurative family to which John Howard and George W. Bush appeal and which is part of that nationalist rhetoric of exclusion that Malouf is attempting to transcend. Such a 'family' stands in opposition to other forms of international communality, such as the United Nations or the European Union, both of which by comparison lack natural—or figurative—familial bonds. Malouf's argument is held together by a deeply felt liberalism, but such liberalism lost its remaining veneer around the time of the British invasion of the Suez Canal in 1956. In Washington, deep underground, Shakespeare needs to be protected from such political realities, and Malouf's image of the English-speaking family, with the White House its new family home, resembles wishful thinking, the kind of wishful thinking that lay behind King O'Malley's proposal almost a century ago to name the capital of Australia 'Shakespeare'.

James Jupp is not widely recognised as a Shakespeare scholar, yet as a native Englishman he knows his Shakespeare well enough to cite Richard II and King John as evidence that even in the sixteenth century the English regarded themselves as superior to the other peoples of the British Isles. Malouf and Jupp were born two years apart, the one in Brisbane, the other in South London, and their common appeal to Shakespeare underlines how close were the parallels between the Australian and British experience in the postwar years. Both men went abroad in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Malouf to teach in England, Jupp to the University of Melbourne. Both returned, if temporarily, to their country of birth in the mid-1960s, at precisely the moment Australia and Britain parted company.

However, unlike David Malouf, who sees the inhabitants of Dublin, Dundee and Dubbo sharing similar, if 'not necessarily the same', characteristics, in *The English in Australia* Jupp insists on the distinction between the English and the British. For Jupp, Shakespeare is staunchly English, not British. Where Malouf's time in Britain seems to have strengthened his idea of a tolerant Britishness binding together differing peoples, Jupp's experience of

Melbourne deepened his understanding of what it was to be English rather than British. Jupp is clear, for example, that Australia is in many ways more specifically English than British. The Australian parliamentary and legal systems are far closer to those in England than to the Scottish system, and Australians speak a version of English closer to so-called standard English than many English dialects. Australia's English nature was a deliberate outcome of the assisted migration program: 'Australian governments deliberately and consistently created a society in which the majority were English or of English descent, and they moved away from that principle less than a generation ago.'

Jupp's insistence that Australia is more English than British is calculated to provoke and unsettle Australian nationalists such as Paul Keating who, while he might grudgingly recognise a British inheritance, would not admit to being in any way English. Yet Jupp is not one of those English nationalists who nowadays wave a flag of St George or toast the Queen at a Trafalgar Day supper, and having stressed the English influence on political and legal structures, he just as quickly acknowledges the disproportionate strength of the Irish and Scots in everyday political life. And despite the alliance between postwar English migrants and John Howard in support of the monarchy, Jupp insists almost indignantly that Howard's Englishness, which he emphasises in reaction to Keating's Irishness, is not that of most English migrants themselves. There is a world of difference between being a (middle-class) Anglophile and a (working-class) English Pom.

Among those elderly English migrants who voted against the Keating republic were those same English migrants who in the 1970s were criticised by Ian Sinclair (of Scots descent) for contaminating the Australian trade union movement with the 'English Disease', a union militancy that was supposedly behind the widespread industrial unrest in Britain. As Jupp points out, the overwhelming majority of English migrants were working class and were brought to Australia by various governments to fill the demand for labour, either for agriculture or later for manufacturing industry. As a result, the English made a more significant contribution to both the union movement and the ALP than has been recognised, though even here the contribution is double-sided. On the one side, English unionists lacked a revolutionary tradition, as did the English as a whole, and their preference was for moderation and non-violent resolution. On

the other side, these same Englishmen helped formulate and defend the White Australia policy within the ALP until the mid-1960s. For Jupp, an English sense of superiority coupled with their desire to defend the working man made it difficult for Australians either to damn or to praise the Poms unequivocally.

Malouf and Jupp are alike in accepting that direct British influence on Australia is no more. As Malouf puts it: 'The fact is, there is no longer a "centre" around which we circulate and dance. We have all shifted place. The world has turned upside down in terms of where Australia and Britain now stand in relation to one another.' Yet while Malouf, with his reverence for Shakespeare, cannot imagine a future lacking the legacy of Shakespeare's language, James Jupp anticipates a multicultural future his one regret being the decline in the popularity of fish and chips. It is not that Jupp is unaware that the English legacy, so central to Australia's foundation and early development, still runs deep through the nation, but for him this legacy is now only one among many. Jupp's obituary for any continuing English influence is not elegiac and, fish and chips aside, it lacks Malouf's sense of regret. Rather than looking to Britishness as a source of coherence in a divided world, Jupp celebrates diversity, and this broader commitment to multiculturalism counters any sense of loss, felt in Malouf, at the waning influence of Englishness.

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AUSTRALIAN ABROAD: NEGOTIATING CULTURE, RE-LOCATING SELF

Sanjukta Dasgupta

"I thought that being in America, surrounded by wealth, the new air, the very idea of a fresh start, would obliterate all my fears. I thought I could change identities like a double agent" (Light p. 36)

Of the books by Australians that were entered for the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2004, M.J.Hyland's *How the Light Gets In*, featured in the Best First Book shortlist of the Eurasia region, though it did not win the award, this debut novel left a lingering impression on the mind, a commendable feat, as 103 books were entered from the Eurasia region in 2003.

The two other Australian books entered for the competition belonged to the South East Asia and South Pacific region of the Commonwealth and were once again by women writers. The Best Book and Best First Book regional winners of CWP 2004 went to *The HAMILTON CASE* by Michelle De Kretser and *Somewhere? Home* by Nada Awar Jarrar. Michelle and Nada located their novels outside Australia, specifically in Sri Lanka or more accurately, the erstwhile Ceylon and present day Lebanon respectively. But it is Hyland's novel *How the Light Gets In* that focuses on Australian lower middle-class culture and the culture of alien spaces negotiated by the protagonist or persona, thereby tracing the dynamics of the local/global dichotomy. However, though an Australian resident, Hyland was born to Irish parents who migrated to Australia in search of a better life. She had a very difficult childhood with an abusive father and an impoverished family life, but ultimately she came back to the mainstream by sheer determination, and is now a lawyer and a writer.

In this connection, the cosmopolitan Australian woman writer who comes to mind is Christina Stead who left Australia, lived for long years in the UK and USA and returned to Australia after about forty-six years. However, the history of Christina Stead being considered as non-Australian and denied Australia's most prestigious literary award, once again brings us to the endless debate about homes and homelands in the era of globalization and migration.

The resemblances are obviously tenuous but at the same time such data vindicate the fact that negotiating multiple geographical and cultural locations have been an on going process for Australian writers, throughout the twentieth century, resulting in many clashes of cultures, sometimes infected by pride and prejudice. But in the transnational environment, national and regional cultures are all part of that immense crucible where each is represented as parts of the whole, which implies that the crucial absence of one leads to a severe sense of loss and reduction in quality and quantity. It is the harmony of heterogeneous congeniality that needs to be celebrated, not the tediousness of homogeneity that chokes many. In order to establish a lustreless uniformity.

For Australians too as perhaps in many other regions in the world the twentieth century very deeply embedded in the psyche of the urban young, the irrepressible desire to chase the American Dream which had replaced the Anglo Dream of the previous centuries as Britain no longer remained the hegemonic power. The cultural variable is the wider penetrating power of the stronger economy that consumes less dominant cultures, as the consumers of these locations are overpowered by the consumerist charisma of endless choice, the magnetism of capitalist economy.

The impact of America's popular culture is all pervasive- it echoes through the coconut plantations of Sri Lanka, the tea plantations of Darjeeling, the streets of Melbourne and Paris, and the towns of the United Kingdom. It is this ubiquitous presence that lures exchange students as well as the Toefel, GRE and GMAT candidates to crack the eligibility tests that provide the preliminary entry point to the land of dreams and opportunities.

M. J. Hyland initially wrote a short story about this American lure titled, "In a Prison of Wayward Exchange Students". In an interview Hyland stated that she had not really planned to have a female protagonist, as such. The politics of gender, was not her agenda. Hyland said,

"I didn't set out to write about a teenage girl, it was mostly an accident. Lou started out as a male character and went through several incarnations. I had written a short story called 'In a Prison for Wayward Exchange Students' and the main character was a boy. Lou then grew out of that story because I wanted to tell the story of one of the exchange students and

how he or she ended up in this prison (Bibliofemme interview)'.

Hyland here very clearly states that the author's agenda gets transformed as the words are born on the page. It is this transmutation that probably Roland Barthes had in mind when he had alerted readers about the construction of the fictional text and the author's inability to dominate the text through very subjective interventions when he observed, "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (Barthes p.149) .

As used by Hyland, as title of her short story, the word "prison" takes on a very crucial significance on many levels. Ideally, exchange students are looked upon as cultural ambassadors negotiating the host culture and introducing the inmates of the host culture to the practices of the home culture, of which the exchange student is a representative. So, Louise Conner from Sydney, Australia, arrives in Chicago to live with her affluent American host family. Very precisely, the modest circumstances of the Australian teenager and the affluence of her temporary American "home" are underscored by Hyland in two short passages:

"No member of my family has ever been overseas. My mum (Sandra), my dad (Mick), and my two teenage sisters, (Erin and Leona), live squashed together in our three-bedroom flat...and the few places I have ever been with them did not involve visas, suitcases or aeroplanes"(Light p.6).

In chapter 2 Lou describes her American home-

" My new home is a suburban mansion: two storeys, wide, tall and white, with six, big white columns on the front porch and curtains clean as milk in the windows" (Light p.13).

However, the most devastating reflective statement in the debut novel about negotiating cultures is implicated in the opening lines of Chapter 3, "I have read that a sheep raised by dogs will eventually learn to chase cars. But how long does it take to learn the tricks of another animal? How long will I need to live with the Hardings before I unlearn the tricks of my own family?" (Light p.33) These questions open up debates about assimilation and acculturation that is becoming increasingly unavoidable in the growing global environment, despite the fact that Hyland is not writing about a migrant person but an exchange scholar.

However, what troubles me is the fact that Hyland came so very, very close to a cross-cultural critiquing of the contrasts and similarities between the American and Australian culture, but somehow, as a reader I felt the book is a case of *missed opportunity*. It is missed opportunity so far as the possibility of showcasing sameness and difference in American and Australian adolescents is concerned- who will obviously participate in the next seventy years of the 21st century, in determining the shape of things to come. Is this absence in the text due to the fact that there are more similarities than differences between white teenagers, irrespective of their cultural location? It is apparent that there exist more differences between teenagers of other colours and their white counterparts, though they may all be fitted out in Calvin Klein and DKNY creations. This is an unavoidable fact that statistics will bear out, though exceptions are present all the time.

Several textual references however will prove how Hyland skimmed over these issues with subtlety, without letting them take on a position of centrality in the text as we notice in Asian American writing and more specifically in Asian Indian fiction. Lou's rich American host parents Henry and Margaret are smart, sophisticated, upwardly mobile middle- aged professionals, who invite an exchange student as a guest to sensitize their teenaged children as well as themselves about people from other cultures. However, there are few exchanges between the teenagers or their friends in school, from which the true purpose of exchange students- to generate mutual understanding in future citizens, is achieved. So, Lou observes, "Margaret and Henry are more cheerful towards me now that my S.A.T. scores are out, and I am officially in the top one percent of the country. This seems to prove that I can 'fit in'" (Light p 192).

The American host parents are represented as possessing typical WASP superiority and snobbishness. Lou's unabashed exploitative and unemotional analysis of her host- mother Margaret is repeated often in the text and these culminate in the following statement- "What she wanted from me was the short-term experience of a quaint and foreign visitor. She does not want to be involved in changing somebody's life for good" (Light p. 194). The Hardings hesitate when Lou asks them to support her stay in America as a permanent resident-

"I'd rather die than go home" (Light p. 183).

"I don't want to go home. I want to know whether you can help me stay in America?" (Light p. 193)

So, Lou rests her hopes on her boyfriend Tom who comes from the richest family in the neighbourhood and is also in love with Lou. Lou dreams of the possibility of moving into his house if the Hardings are unable to sponsor her stay in America even if his family supports the Ku Klux Klan-

"I am still going to ask if I can move in. I'll tell him what I think of bigots and racists after I have got a green card and I've got into a good college on a full scholarship" (Light p. 194).

Earlier in the novel Lou had planned, "When school has finished and my scholarship ends, I'll move in with Tom's family and become a citizen" (Light p.167)"

Lou tells James, her host-brother, about her deep sense of repulsion towards her own family, though there are occasions in the text that prove her desire to be loved by her mother and father and have a bonding with her sisters- "I tell him that my real family is foul; that my sisters and parents are foul and that the whole point of my coming here was to purify myself and that I never want to see them again" (Light p.206)

It is deeply disturbing to sense the total alienation of a young teenager from her family, and home, and her obsessive desire to relocate in a strange location. But the sense of frustration, desperation, longing for affection, desire for surrogate parents and siblings have such a destructive impact on the intelligent, imaginative and obviously sensitive Australian teenager, that she gives into easy addictives such as gin and cigarettes, apart from becoming a petty pilferer of money and a borrower too. The cover of the novel is very interesting. It shows the lower half of a freckled young female face, heavily lipsticked, with a lighted cigarette, between the slightly parted lips, the lower section of the nose is all that we see of the face. A face without eyes. A fine whiff of smoke rises upwards from the burning cigarette. Debra Billson's cover design is remarkably postmodern, as it disturbs the reader and also allows the reader to construct the rest of Lou's face, by giving it deliberate anonymity, that can be typical and yet exceptional.

But Lou's American dream is to be an achiever, a talented student with full scholarship- that is the elusive light that lures her, that is the light that had tantalized her into pursuing academics that resulted in her distinction of being an exchange student in the USA. When the sordid mail from home arrives, reminding her of what she had escaped from, she tries to erase the links in her mind by mapping a new journey for herself- "I will fulfill my enormous potential, learn a new word every day, read a novel every week and become the world's most impressive autodidact and polymath. I will go to university and live in student digs." (Light p.54).

Chapter Four concludes with the possibility of a ray of hope in the form of a streak of light under the door- "I lie down and look at the light coming in under the door and I am convinced that everything will be better from now on" (Light p 54).

Despite the fact that Lou is compelled by circumstances mostly of her own creation to experience the humiliation of being sent to a detention center for wayward exchange students, she also becomes a victim of petty jealousy, and ultimately she finds that she has to return to Sydney after all. Interestingly, the novel informs the reader of the existence of juvenile detention centers for wayward exchange students, who can either be taken up by another set of temporary host parents or have to return home before the completion of their grant term. In the detention centre Lou meets exchange students from other parts of the world, such as Lishney from Russia whom she gets to love and Kris, a girl from Norway whom she likes enough, to confide in. Such rapport with teenagers from other parts of the world who have different cultures and languages debunks the notion that cultural distance is synonymous with emotional distancing. Ironically, she fails to establish similar rapport with her American host brother and sister, James and Bridget.

So though a situation verging on fantasy and wish fulfillment is constructed through a brilliant sequence of letter reading from home, Lou's life just moves on to another plane of experience as in the last page of the novel she once again notices a shaft of light under the door- "There's a light on outside, in the hall, and it's coming in under the door" (Light p. 317). The concluding line of the novel, makes the much-hyped postmodern maxim of moving on seem scathingly ironic. The simple words very poignantly highlight the searing loneliness of the intelligent and sensitive affection-starved,

troubled teenager's need for love and understanding- "I'll watch people walking in the street below and wonder which of them I might like to follow home." (Light p317)

Hyland's debut novel tracking Lou's journey towards a shaft of light, a glimmer of hope, however maintains the stereotypes of the lure of stronger economies, of opportunities, dreams as well as the sense of displacement and cultural shock that the exchange student experiences as an alien, who can exist in the periphery of the host- homes and can never gain the status of the insider. The trauma of living in her own home in Sydney is replaced by the constant demand to adjust to the alien, sanitized ways of life of the Hardings, who however do not flinch while watching gang rape as family entertainment on television. Lou's need for a surrogate mother is repeatedly emphasized, as she tries to reach out to Margaret Harding and later Gertie, an attending staff of the "prison' for wayward exchange students.

However, though Homi Bhabha's words resonate with the dream of a transnational dissemination of culture, on a macro level of the abstract and the concrete "America leads to Africa, the nations of Europe and Asia meet in Australia; the margins of the nation displace the center; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis" (Bhabha p 6) the journey seems to be longer and more complex in the context of the micropolitics of daily living, experienced by each sensitive individual in negotiating the mystery of life. This desire or disenchantment cuts across geography, race, colour, class and gender The pathetic disillusionment of the young who crave for nurturing in dysfunctional families, is both a local and global phenomenon. Many young people make a desperate bid to survive by navigating to lands of opportunities only to learn the crucial lesson that searching for the way home is a relentless process of demystification, as one discovers and deconstructs one's dream of self by negotiating the Other and reconstructing the self.

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“These Are Their Stories”

Suchorita Chattopadhyay

Storytelling is a popular and extremely effective art form whose purpose is not just to entertain but also to educate the reader. It is an important component of the tradition of oral narrative. Traditionally, down the ages, moral lessons, historical tales and practical knowledge have been passed down generations through the oral mode, through songs, poems and stories. Storytelling implies the presence of a listening audience – and in the days when these oral tales are documented, they call for a reading public too. The very act of storytelling is in itself indicative of a communal lifestyle – a life where people live together in groups – share each other's joys and pains - build a tradition which they then hand over to the next generation. The basic difference between oral narrative and properly chronicled written narrative is that while the written documents are created in isolation and are products of exclusion, oral narratives are products of cooperation and inclusion. It is a community product which is born out of interactive sessions and grows and develops even while it is being shared and created. Such stories document and explain the creation of the physical and spiritual universe of the concerned community. They include personal biographies as well as social and environmental issues. These stories are actually an essential and effective part of the survival strategies of most indigenous people of the world. Through the stories the older generations pass on their experiences and acquired knowledge and understanding to the succeeding generations, thus making the process of survival somewhat easier for them. Such stories are mostly 'wondrous' and often quite 'dangerous'.

A native culture is mostly born out of and shaped by its stories. These stories hold the hope of survival of a culture, record and interpret its struggles and in fact most certainly ensure its continuity. Often among indigenous groups it is found that the younger generation is more passionate about preserving their culture. They are more energetic and committed to probable social changes and are extremely eager to promote their indigenous culture and identity. Oral history, in the hands of this younger generation, has become a means of fighting the legacy of a colonial establishment, and all the

ensuing prejudices incorporated in it. It is in this light that we see how remarkably numerous communities across Canada are initiating oral history projects. It would be extremely interesting to concentrate on the use of 'stories' in projecting the Canadian indigenous culture – to explore how 'orality' is being used in today's Canadian context.

The stories generally lend voice to the memory of the indigenous people. This memory is often bitter and harsh, full of pain and suffering, driven by a sense of being haunted and hunted. So the 'telling' of this memory often becomes a process of coming to terms with life or a process of overcoming their trauma and making a new beginning. There is also the subtle implication that the ability to write is equivalent to having more control and power. This also leads to a further distortion where literacy is invariably associated with dishonesty, injustice and exploitation. The systematic spread of literacy has gradually been regarded as an integral part of the overall process of colonization. Literacy also provides the means of fusing the oral with the written. Métis and First Nations writers alike have expressed the difficulty of transferring oral stories onto paper. It is widely believed that a lot is lost in transferring words onto paper. Moreover, the writer here has to overcome the difficulty of not getting a first-hand feedback from the listeners. The identity of the story-teller is also of great importance because not just anybody can successfully narrate just any story. The nature and the character of the story-teller invariably get filtered into these stories. The involvement and the commitment of the story-teller also contribute to the final flavour to a very large extent.

Canada's official policy of multiculturalism has contributed to a dramatic increase in the cultural activity of Native Canadians in the latter part of the twentieth century. Native writers who write for the common public, who can be either Native or non-Native, and goes through the commercial route for publication and distribution of their writings invariably feel a tension between their traditional cultures from which they are moving away and the more dominant culture of the mainstream Canadian society. They invariably try to re-establish connections with traditional cultures as well as recover at least some kind of a sense of indigenouness which they feel they are gradually losing. It is probably this sense of a loss of identity and the ensuing feeling of insecurity that prompts them to turn to the mode of oral storytelling which they increasingly attempt to

incorporate within their traditional written literature. The Native writers mostly try to achieve a kind of pictorial representation of a community, their own community, in their writings. Stories are undoubtedly the best way of representing a particular community, highlighting important social, familial as well as natural and environmental issues. These stories can often be interpreted more readily as an embodiment of Native values and cultural codes. They often portray a blending of mythic elements with realism. During the days of early colonization in Canada, a major effect on the original Native population was that the culture of the indigenous people and the oral tradition used were for a long time on the verge of being eradicated. Slowly and steadily, the enforced language of the colonizer became the accepted norm. These Native communities declared that they were being marginalized. In their desire for gaining recognition and in attempting to create an independent identity, Native Canadian authors started highlighting the problems encountered by those who wished to record their experiences, but were being denied a voice. Since the days of colonization, the history of Canada has almost always been conveyed from the point of view of the settlers, who have diligently ignored the vivid language of the various Native or Aboriginal communities, placing greater emphasis on available cold fact and uniformity. Aboriginal groups, who were unable to provide any alternative to the already existing facts, had their experiences resigned to a collective "...wordless cry" – a helpless outburst of mute frustration. So today, Canada's Aboriginal peoples value a legacy of oral tradition that provides an account of each group's origins, history, spirituality, lessons of morality, and life skills. They have stories which bind a community with its past and future, and oral traditions which reach across generations.

Anthropologists have conducted cross-cultural studies of Canada's Aboriginal peoples in an effort to understand past interpretations of Native origins in Canada. Consequently they have recorded many spiritual stories and teachings of Native storytellers, and have subsequently transcribed them.

However, the inflection and intention of the speaker's voice which is very crucial in this respect, have often been lost when the stories are transformed into written words. Translation also, more often than not, leads to altered meanings. Contemporary historians are aware of and attach a lot of importance to the oral tradition and its diversity throughout Canada. Many of these stories

bear witness to how women and men were created and populated the land. These descriptions of genesis are as varied as the religions of the Aboriginal people, but all maintain that life began on the North American continent. Among these people, eight unique stories of genesis exist and have been adapted in several forms: the earth diver, world parent, emergence, conflict, robbery, rebirth of corpse, two creators and their contests, and the brother myth. Apart from these there are also stories which tell us about the different communities – their joy and happiness, pain and sorrow, their hopes and frustrations. These stories are of the people, for the people and by the people. They display a distinct human connotation and are actually the much required chronicles of the lives of Canada's Aboriginal people.

The Delgamuukw decision by the Canadian Supreme Court in 1997 has radically changed the status of oral stories in Canada. This ruling was about ways of proving Aboriginal titles and the decision "required the courts to come to terms with the oral histories of aboriginal societies, which, for many aboriginal nations, are the only record of their past ... [and which] play a crucial role in the litigation of aboriginal rights "(par. 84). Consequently, this decision has encouraged a host of Aboriginal writers to come forward and share their words with the rest of the country. Writers like Thomas King, Beth Brant and Jeannette Armstrong have consciously adopted the tradition of the oral story and utilized its innate power to get across relevant messages to their people. Attempts have been made to rewrite oral tales and also to incorporate the sense of the spoken language into their work. Thus the stories become a chronicle of contemporary social and economical issues, the struggle for language revival and also a kind of testimonial of the process of discovery and healing that the Aboriginal people seem to be undergoing constantly. Interestingly these stories do not always attempt to focus on the negatives, positive attitudes and notions are also displayed. The writers experimenting with the oral tradition also remember that the visual aspect of storytelling is equally important. So they also try to incorporate the gesturing, the expressions and intonations of the storyteller as much as practicable.

Within the confines of the Native communities oral literature remains a strong and popular tradition and it has effectively influenced a number of Aboriginal writers. Harry Robinson's story "An Okanagan Indian becomes a Captive Circus Showpiece in

England" is a wonderful example of a blending of the oral and the written. Other examples are Jeannette Armstrong's "This is a Story" and the writings of Thomas King. An analysis of the 'stories' of Thomas King would help us to trace the effectiveness and relevance of this tradition.

Thomas King, the well known Canadian Native writer (Cherokee origin) has rightly observed that when non-Native writers write about the Natives, they usually write about the past, about the "historical Indian". He also observes that when Natives write about themselves, they mostly write about the present. In the introduction to his *All My Relations*, which is 'an Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction', Thomas King has written,

"..... as Native storytellers have become bilingual – telling and writing their stories in English, French, and Spanish – they have created both a more pan-Native as well as a non-Native audience." (1)

Thomas King has said to Natasha Davies:

"I also hang out with all sorts of weird native people. They tell their stories, and sometimes bits of those stories become bits of my prose. I keep my ears open."

He has been instrumental in promoting the story from within the Native communities thereby establishing it in a big way in the broader spectrum of Canadian Native literature. He has always been looking for stories, stories that would inform, would explain, would tell and would purge. His quest for 'a' story, for 'the' story has finally culminated in his 2003 Massey Lectures published under the name *The Truth About Stories*.

King begins all the lectures in *The Truth about Stories* with one particular Native oral story - the tale of the turtle. He says, "There is a story I know" and goes on to narrate how the same story can be told in different ways by different people and can also affect people in different ways. He begins each lecture in this manner:

"There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the changes in the details. Sometimes in the order

of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away." (2)

King goes on to narrate how the audience at Prince Rupert and Lethbridge, Peterborough and Moncton, all got intrigued by this tale and quizzed the narrator. They would want to know what was below the turtle and the narrator would tell them –

"Another turtle....And below that turtle? Another turtle.....So how many turtles are there? No one knows for sure,.....but its turtles all the way down." (3)

These lectures are actually a collection of stories, stories which tell us about people, about individuals and about communities. A refrain that we come across over and over again in these lectures is "The truth about stories is that that's what we are" (4). So the stories are what these people are – "These are their stories" (5).

In the opening lecture called "You'll never believe what happened" is always a great way to start King tells us the story of his young days. He remembers the kind of stories that appealed to him in those days. Ultimately it becomes a story about himself.

"Fact of the matter was I just wanted to get out of town. Wanted to get as far away from where I was as I could..... I'm sure part of it was teenage angst, and part of it was being poor in a rich country, and part of it was knowing that white was more than just a colour." (6)

Thomas King tells us the story of his disturbed childhood, the disappearance of his father, his mother's agony, and how as middle-aged men, he and his brother rediscovered their father only to know that he had died after marrying two more times and had left behind seven other children. King rounds up his story with the expression – "That's my family. These are their stories." (7) He goes on to elaborate that such stories cannot have any special significance for anybody other than him and his brother. But the purpose behind the telling of such stories is more didactic.

"I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me

that will be chained to these stories as long as I live." (8)

King urges us to be careful about the stories we tell, because in the same way that they can build, they can also destroy. He says "...once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world." (9) He tells us his favourite creation story. It is the story of Charm the crazy woman who dwelt in an ancient world located above the earth. She moved around with the fish, the rabbit and the badger and how to satiate her indomitable curiosity she stuck her head into a hole and fell through it and crashed onto our blue earth which was only made of water and where the ducks, the muskrats and the pelicans carefully placed her on the back of a turtle so that she wouldn't drown. The Otter got some mud and Charm, her twins and all the other animals and human beings joined hands in creating the world we dwell in today. In fact, Thomas King is careful enough to point out to us that we might find this story somewhat incredible. He writes,

- "And you're probably wondering how in the world I expect you to believe any of this, given the fact that we live in a predominantly scientific, capitalist, Judeo-Christian world governed by physical laws, economic imperatives, and spiritual precepts." (10)

The second lecture, "You're not the Indian I had in Mind" clearly tells us, "You can't understand the world without telling a story" (11) He uses stories and then further stories are built into them to drive home his point. He tells us the story of Edward Sheriff Curtis and how he went on to photograph the Indians. Through this story of photographing Indian artists, Kings actually talks about the construct of the proverbial North American Indian – Fenimore Cooper's creation 'Chingachgook', John Augustus Stone's creation 'Metamora' and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 'Hiawatha'. Curtis was in fact "looking for the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct." (12) Thomas King's story here informs us –

"In literature in the United States, this particular span of time is known as the American Romantic Period, and the Indian was tailor-made for it. With its emphasis on feeling, its interest in nature, its fascination with exoticism, mysticism and eroticism, and its preoccupation with the glorification of the past, American Romanticism found in the Indian a symbol in which all these concerns could be united. Prior to the

nineteenth century, the prevalent image of the Indian had been that of an inferior being. The Romantics imagined their Indian as dying. But in that dying, in that passing away, in that disappearing from the stage of human progress, there was also a sense of nobility." (13)

Fitted into this story about Indians, addressing issues of racism is another short, very short story about a high school experience where he got turned down by a girl he had asked to go to the prom with him. The reason was that her father did not want her to go out with a Mexican. This memory prompts King to write,

"Racism is a funny thing, you know. Dead quiet on occasion. Often dangerous. But sometimes it has a peculiar sense of humour. The guys I ran with looked at Mexicans with a certain disdain. I'd like to say that I didn't, but that wasn't true. No humour here. Except that while I was looking at Mexicans, other people, as it turned out, were looking at me." (14)

King tells us other stories which expose the "narrow parameters of race". (15) On board a German vessel out of Hamburg on the way to New Zealand, Thomas King was cornered by the ship's cook who charged him with –"You're not the Indian I had in mind". This enabled King to tell his readers about full-blood Indians and mixed-blood ones. His experience in New Zealand was even more interesting. When the immigration officer approached him for a renewal of his visa, and heard that he was 'Indian', his immediate reaction was, "Dear me,I don't believe we take applications from Indians" (16) The reason was that there were too many. Surprised at this mass exodus of Native people from Canada or the United States, King continued to quiz the immigration officer and discovered that all these 'Indians' came from "New Delhi, Bombay...." (17) King's reaction was understandably helpless:

"When Karen told me her father wouldn't let me take her to the prom because he didn't want her dating Mexicans, I told her I wasn't Mexican. I was Indian.

When the Immigration officer told me I couldn't apply for a visa because I was Indian, I told him I wasn't East Indian, I was North American Indian." (18)

Well, stories are always a storehouse of information.

To get back to King's stories about 'Indians', they definitely help him to address relevant issues about the identity of the 'Indian'. In a stark and piercing declaration he says,

".....there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations.

But for those of us who are Indians, this disjunction between reality and imagination is akin to life and death. For to be seen as "real", for people to "imagine" us as Indians, we must be "authentic". (19)

In the end Thomas King admits that the importance of his original project of photographing Indian artists got somewhat sidetracked. With a lot of pride King says:

"I want to look Indian so that you will see me as Indian because I want to be Indian, even though being Indian and looking Indian is more a disadvantage than it is a luxury." (20)

He acknowledges that the 'identity' of the Indian or their photographs is not the central issue any longer. What is important ultimately is how these stories affect you and what you learn from them.

"What's important are the stories I've heard along the way. And the stories I've told. Stories we make up to try to set the world straight." (21)

In his third lecture "Let me entertain you", Thomas King addresses a series of issues relevant to the daily struggle of the Native people. Invited to participate in a panel discussion during an "Indian Awareness Week", King told stories. Through his stories he talked about "broken treaties, residential schools,the appropriation of Native names, symbols, and motifs." (22) A particularly moving story is the one about Ishi, a lone surviving Indian whom the people of Oroville put into a jail meant for insane people. King tells us how this man was 'rescued' and put in the Anthropological Museum at the University of California at San Francisco with the help of the Bureau of Indian Affairs "who believed that they owned all Native people ..." (23). The man spent the rest of his days at this museum working as a junior janitor. The pain lay in the realization that

"You can go home any time you wish, they told him. Which must have made him laugh and cry at the same time. For there was no home. No family. Not anymore." (24)

King's story brought a lot of applause – but he was still designated to the role of a mere entertainer – nothing serious, nothing 'academic' was found in his presentation. While the white speakers from Washington were handed an envelope each after the presentation, the Mohawk invitee and King were completely ignored. The last straw was when at the end of the presentation, a young Native man, dressed in complete native finery, asked him "what the hell an 'apple' was doing speaking for real Indians." (25) King goes on to explain that the word 'apple' is a derogatory word to mean an Indian who is "red on the outside and white on the inside". (26) So a whole lot of pain, frustration and defeat have gone into these stories.

As Thomas King tells us stories about the plight of the Indians, he also declares – "Complaint is not my purpose....is simply my attempt to call attention to the cultural distance that separated Europeans and Indians." (27) There is a veiled insinuation in the way Indians are used and exploited for the purpose of entertainment.

"Strange world. But maybe being entertainment isn't so bad. Maybe it's what you're left with when the only defence you have is a good story. Maybe entertainment is the story of survival." (28)

The last two sections are named "A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark" and "What is it About Us that You Don't Like?" and subscribe to the dictum "The truth about stories is that that's what we are". As the Laguna storyteller Leslie Silko tells us:

"I will tell you something about stories. They aren't just entertainment / Don't be fooled / They are all we have, you see / All we have to fight off / Illness and death. You don't have anything / If you don't have the stories." (29)

Thomas King tells us about his friend the Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish writer and theorist Louis Owens with whom he shared common literary interests. He remembers him as one of the many instances when his mixed-blood friends and associates have committed suicide, unable to carry on the burden of a confusing, unstable and insecure identity.

"We understood in each other the same desperate desire for acceptance. And we were both hopeful pessimists. That is, we wrote knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world. But we wrote in the hope that they would." (30)

In this context King tells us about reading and associated statistics. Plenty of statistics are found about people of different age groups who read books, who read newspapers. But strangely, no such statistics are available for oral literature. When King brought up this rather relevant question at a scholarly conference, he was told that

"the reason we pay attention to written literature is that books are quantifiable, whereas oral literature is not. How can you quantify something that has sound but no physical form..... something that exists only in the imagination of the storyteller, cultural ephemera that is always at the whim of memory, something that needs to be written down to bewhole ? (31)

Along with his friend Louis Owens, King discovered that "stories were medicine, that a story told one way could cure, that the same story told another way could injure." (32) It is probably the same realization that prompted nineteenth and twentieth century anthropologists and ethnographers to collect transcribe and also translate Native stories. The primary purpose is to 'preserve' these stories before they are completely lost. This effort on the part of the social scientists to preserve their culture and identity through their stories has also encouraged the Native people to come up with more stories.

"....Native writers began to use the Native present as a way to resurrect a Native past and to imagine a Native future. To create, in words, as it were, a Native universe." (33)

King brings in references from a host of stories narrated by Native people, by the likes of Louis Owens, Robert Alexie, N.Scott Momaday and Jeannette Armstrong. Very passionately King tells us about his urge to tell some stories over and over again.

"I tell them to myself, to my friends, sometimes to strangers. Because they make me laugh. Because they are a particular kind of story. Saving stories, if you will. Stories that help keep me alive." (34)

Kings tells us about the Coyote, the Raven and the Ducks. The human beings are planning to steal the duck feathers and the ducks wonder "what is it about us that they don't like?" (35) The Coyote points out that the human beings just like the duck feathers better. The story points at the Innumerable injustices and atrocities that have happened in the past. They refer directly to the "forced removal of the Indians from their homesthe reserve system....the paternalistic manner in which governments manage the affairs of Native people." (36) In the Coyote-Duck story, the Coyote as the trickster emerges as the winner and it is only a matter of time till the greedy Coyote comes back for more. King uses this story to introduce 'legislation' for the Native people. The last lecture exposes the atrocities meted out to the Indian people in a more direct manner.

King's 'Afterword' entitled 'Private Stories' marks a perfect signing off. He talks about the ethics involved in 'stories'. The purpose of a story has also to be decided by the storyteller. He has to feel the need for a story and produce it accordingly. The stories ultimately are expected to extend a healing touch, mark a new beginning as well as strengthen older ties. That stories can often have a therapeutic effect is a fact that has been known for years. Individuals grow up with these stories and on these stories. Entire communities live their lives through these stories. Entire histories are captured in these stories.

"These are their stories".

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MARGARET ATWOOD AND CANADIAN LITERATURE

Debarati Bandopadhyay

Describing the nature of New literatures in English Bruce King had written:

That English literature has changed radically since about 1960 is obvious less clear is the nature of this new literature....New Literatures indicates that post-colonialism is a further development of the decolonization and the changed cultural perspective that followed the Second World War; 'New' reminds us that the literatures of the former colonies are still not known or much studied abroad, in contrast to 'post-colonial' or 'global' which assume that familiarity with a few texts allows generalizations....An objection is that New Literatures continues the drawing of national cultural boundaries during a time of the lowering of barriers....A further objection to the term...is that they have long histories, although their prominence on the world's cultural map is recent.¹

In the light of this statement, we may make an attempt to understand the nature of Canadian literature. Canada, the first British colony to attain dominion status in 1867, has been trying to search for a literary identity of its own for the last century but it is only in the second half of the twentieth-century that the attempt has shown signs of becoming successful. In this context, we may remember that while delivering the Clarendon Lectures in 1991 at Oxford University, Margaret Atwood had stated categorically that she was not making 'an attempt to prove...that such a thing as Canadian Literature exists' and explained that 'twenty or thirty years ago' she did try to prove it then:

It was a standard witticism in some quarters—even in Canada, especially in Canada to say that the term 'Canadian Literature' was an oxymoron. Poets wrote satirical poems about its shoddy and derivative state, including recipes for its concoction that included such ingredients as one beaver, two Mounties, a sprinkling of maple leaves, and so on. In 1972 I myself published a book called *Survival*, which was dedicated to the premiss that there really was a Canadian Literature, that it was not the same as either American or English literature....²

In the last three decades of the twentieth-century, if the existence of Canadian literature has become indisputable, then it is due to the achievements of Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood, and as the latter self-effacingly states, for 'Michael Ondaatje, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, and Alice Munro'.³ Among the 'native' Canadian authors to receive critical attention are the dramatists Tomson Highway and Drew Hayden Taylor, and the novelists Jeannette Armstrong and Thomas King. The literary activities of Rohinton Mistry, Anita Rau Badami and Shauna Singh Baldwin have also inspired readers, especially from India, to acknowledge the growing importance of Canada in the context of contemporary literature.

To discuss the history of the emergence of Canadian literature from an invisible state to its present eminence, or its distinctive 'native' quality, or its literary history in the context of postcolonialism, feminism and multiculturalism, or even individual Canadian authors writing in different genres, would each require book-length studies. Again, there is a possibility of homogenization and erasure of individual characteristics in such an attempt. For instance, to focus our attention on the distinctly 'native' voice only could prevent us from viewing Canadian English literature in the context of its cultural reality of multiracial, multicultural existence. And Atwood has already warned that the average 'English literary person' has not much reason to feel interested in Canadian literature which, 'lacking the exoticism of Africa, the strange fauna of Australia or the romance of India, still tends to occupy the bottom rung on the status ladder of ex-British colonies.'⁴

In order to avoid presenting either the specifically 'native' or 'global' elements, and to produce a fairly comprehensive picture of the concerns in contemporary Canadian literature, I have chosen to focus on Margaret Atwood's literary works. As the winner of the Booker more than once, she is the most prominent and hence, may be taken as the literary representative of her compatriots. And the main concerns of New Literature that we need to understand in the Canadian context may be summarized as

Self-consciousness of... narrative form and content,...self-reflexive narrator,...concern with (mis)representation in language, history, and visual images,...feminism,...interactions with European and native Canadian myth and history,...focus

on the meaning of personal and national identity...[and] an understanding of the present through the mirror of the past....⁵

In order to 'read' Atwood's texts today, it is necessary that we understand the relationship between her works and the contemporary Canadian political and cultural concerns they reflect, especially if we remember Peter Brooker's idea of culture and literature:

It is often argued that the study of culture and the academic discipline of Cultural Studies, in particular, are inescapably political because of the issues of VALUE, IDEOLOGY, and POWER this study involves....Cultural politics comes into play in academic study in so far as it is openly committed to a CRITIQUE (or defence) of established or DOMINANT culture. If critical, this puts it in a position both outside and within given intellectual, social and economic structures....⁶

As an established Canadian literary figure, Atwood is both an integral part of the 'intellectual, social and economic structures' Brooker has mentioned, and as one who subtly criticizes the values, assumptions and the ideology of the power-structure that has given shape to her contemporary society, an outsider. In other words, with the prerogative as well as the responsibility of being both an insider and an outsider, Atwood is ideally situated to represent the relationship between a text and power, politics, resistance, complicity and the apparent and hidden messages that constitute Canadian culture today.

Politics is omnipresent in contemporary life. Generally, we are concerned at present with the concepts of postcolonial and neocolonial power relations between the erstwhile colonies and the dominant powers in the western world. Canada, in this context, was not a colony in exactly the same sense as India. However, Canada too belongs to the postcolonial era and we have to view Atwood's works in the light of the consequent power-relationships. In order to explain the concept of the 'political', Atwood has simply stated that '[w]hat we mean is how people relate to a power structure and vice versa.'⁷ And her comment on the function of the novel is: 'I do see the novel as a vehicle for looking at society.'⁸ Combining the two statements, we can understand that in Atwood's fictional world, human relationships entrenched in a power struggle, a search for

means of survival and meaningful existence within the matrix of a given socio-political and cultural identity are of utmost importance.

In Atwood's novels, the protagonists understand the political nature of the world, but are frequently unable to protect themselves from the intricate patterns of hegemony hidden behind the conspicuous, alluring vision of commercial success and consumerism, integral parts of the First World lifestyle. In *Surfacing* (1972), Atwood's early and extremely famous novel, we find proof of this strewn all over the text. The lonely female protagonist reaches the secluded, deserted cottage by the lake with a few friends to search for her missing father. Their journey towards this retreat in nature becomes a voyage punctuated by flashes of revelation about the power-relations governing international transactions. But what problematizes this realization is the accompanying sense of personal and national vulnerability. The text reads:

Now we're passing through the turnoff to the pit the Americans hollowed out. From here it looks like an innocent hill, spruce-covered, but the thick power lines running into the forest give it away. I heard they'd left...they could still be living in there, the generals in concrete bunkers....There's no way of checking because we aren't allowed in. The city invited them to stay, they were good for business, they drank a lot.⁹

Like the spruce-covered, tranquil hill, Canada appears to be unmolested as a colony, but a suggestion of the imposition of the neocolonial policies of the U.S.A. on the compliant neighbour is disturbing, especially in sight of the fact that hindrances to dissemination of complete knowledge as to the nature of the foreign power centre here seems to have been accepted by the Canadians in a docile manner. The complicity of the Canadians in the process of creation and entrenchment of such power-structures comes from their concern with the 'good' 'business' from Americans. Enforced ignorance and the inability to resist political, economic and cultural dominance situates Canada firmly in the midst of the political reality of the world in the twentieth-century.

However, the knowledge that they have been both economically exploited and politically marginalized comes from David, a character in *Surfacing* who has spent some years in the U.S.A.. He comments about Canada: 'Do you realize...that this country is founded on the

bodies of dead animals? Dead fish, dead seals, and historically dead beavers, the beaver is to this country what the black man is to the United States....'¹⁰ Such allusions to the past and the passing comparison with the black man in the U.S.A are Atwood's strategies of placing politics in the context of history being made in Canada and also all over the world now.

In a subsequent section of *Surfacing*, another expression of the same phenomenon of neocolonial exploitation of Canada in modern days becomes evident in the story of a fishing expedition in the lake by the Surfer's father's cottage. Though the lake is in their own country and neighbourhood, the Canadians' activity becomes suspect to the Americans who are visiting the same lake for the same purpose. Superior buying power makes the Americans aggressively confident of their own deserts and the Canadians are treated almost as 'poachers' or trespassers in their own backyard.

I hear a whine, motorboat....American flag on the front and another at the back, two irritated-looking businessmen...and a thin shabby man from the village, guiding....

"Getting any?" one of the Americans yells, teeth bared, *friendly as a shark*. I say "No"...."Reel in," I say to David. There's no sense in staying here now. If they catch one thing they will be here all night, if they don't get anything they'll blast off...deafening the fish. They're the kind who catch more than they can eat and they'd do it with dynamite if they could get away with it.¹¹

[my italics]

We should note that the lone Canadian guiding the Americans is thin and silent, obviously a needy villager while the American's money speaks volumes. However, a full knowledge of the nature of political and economic power of the Americans breeds in the Canadians here, not rebellion but silence and prompts them to withdraw. And worse follows. An American offers to buy the cottage the protagonist is living in. She refuses the huge sum offered as she does not want to sell her father's property (and lose all links with the past and the natural), nor does she feel entitled to do so. David tells her, moreover, that the Americans need the place for spying, as it has a strategically important location and also that later

they will take over all of Canada by sending in the 'Marines' and demolishing all Canadian nationalist resistance movements.¹²

David's lessons in the future of the country reminds the Surfacers of her school lessons in history where words like 'demarcation' and 'sovereignty'¹³ had remained just that, mere words. And even when the words were, and are, related, she muses, to a country's history and its survival as an independent entity, the urgency is lost as the contexts of the historical texts are emptied of their significance. From the level of the individual's response to collective response to national and political crises, the story remains one of silence and amnesia, if not one of deliberate refusal to get involved.

One important concern of New literatures is the location and position of the female citizen in the political and cultural context of her country. In *Surfacing*, the female protagonist produces a picture of the social and pedagogical customs she has had to follow as a child. As a student, she had not asked the teachers to make clarifications; never sought history to be brought to life, made to relate to one's own life because nobody else did. And, never a girl student. If silence seems to be the norm in Atwood's fictional representation of Canada, it is more so for the women there, enforced and nurtured since childhood. And all this in the First World, where, compared to the Third World countries, colonial exploitation and subjection of women to such mores are assumed to be nonexistent or phenomena from the distant past only.

It is not only in *Surfacing*, a 1970s novel, that Atwood relates the search for a woman's identity and meaning of existence with that of Canada, her nation. In *Bodily Harm* (1981), we again find a picture of the female protagonist's realization of the nature of Canadian national policies against the backdrop of the international politics. Here Rennie, a single female fashion and lifestyle journalist, already persecuted by an unknown assailant in Canada, and therefore feeling insecure especially because of the attitude of the police (a single woman must have done something immoral to attract male criminal attention, seems to be their attitude), goes to a Caribbean island on an assignment, actually, to recuperate. There she unwittingly becomes a witness to the excesses of the political and economic authorities and the arms smugglers. Atwood had placed a girl like Rennie, innocent of the desperation with which

politicians cling to positions of power and pelf, deliberately in that dangerous situation, stating: 'I wanted somebody [like Rennie] from our society where the fore front preoccupations are your appearance, your...job...and put her into *that*'.¹⁴ This could well indicate Atwood's evaluation of not only the female compatriot's but also any average Canadian's orientation of life.

On the Caribbean island, all that the honest politician, Dr. Minnow, asks of Rennie, is to note, to be a witness as to how the islanders have been furthering their heinous political ends by misusing the funds the 'sweet Canadians' had been sending over for relief work and rehabilitation, without understanding the situation at all. Dr. Minnow is murdered when he wins the election, so is the other candidate, and the de facto ruler retains power again, citing political disturbance and the murders to justify this step to the Americans and 'sweet Canadians'. Rennie, an unwilling witness to the truth, is imprisoned as a spy and has to observe her cellmate Lora, another western woman, being abused and literally battered to death when she protests against their duplicity. Rennie, however, is ultimately saved by the Canadian diplomat, but not before she has been sworn to silence.

She is asked to sign a release form saying that while in custody she has not been harmed in any way and has not witnessed any other detainee being so harmed. She thinks of Lora, her pulped face. She understands that unless she makes a mark on this paper they may not let her out....She signs her name.¹⁵

And with this signature there is a tacit understanding of her complicity in the atrocities of the regime. But against Rennie's vulnerability and compulsion to accept the given situation, if we view the stance taken by the Canadian diplomat handling Rennie's case and facilitating her return to Canada, then a certain desire and ability to keep one's eyes deliberately shut, becomes evident from his reactions:

...I suppose you are telling me not to write about what happened to me, she says. Requesting, he says. Of course we believe in freedom of the press. But for them it's a matter of saving face. For you too, thinks Rennie. Have you any idea of what's going on in here? She says.

The Council of Churches made an inspection and was satisfied with the

conditions, he says, too quickly. In any case, we can't interfere in internal matters.¹⁶

Atwood indicts the duplicity in Canadian behaviour here. But does it mean that in this plea for silence in the name of international protocol, the ability to register an honest protest has disappeared completely? Not quite. Rennie, the common, politically ignorant Canadian citizen decides to wait for the opportunity to raise her voice, once she gets back to Canada. Instead of a mere lifestyle journalist in the significantly named magazine—*Leisure*—she has become a 'subversive. She was not one once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report. For the first time in her life, she can't think of a title'.¹⁷

It is a moment of at least one Canadian citizen's political awakening and a vitally important step taken towards an honest re-evaluation of national history and identity. The counterpoising of Caribbean politics with the Canadian policies reveals another facet of the propensity to maintain status quo in the name of political correctness and expediency. It is only after such incidents as Rennie witnesses that infringement of human rights at the most can turn into an inconspicuous footnote in the First World's postcolonial or historical discourses. The possible reason behind such silence about the original incident on the one hand and the appropriation of such anecdotes by the academics has been described by Gareth Griffiths:

The study of post-colonial societies and texts has been recruited to the politics of metropolitan academics....More recently, though, the problem has arisen that with the realization of the danger that post-colonial theory may act as a globalizing international force to wipe out local differences and concerns, an opposite and equally different reaction has developed in the form of a resurgence of atavistic, essentially nativist theories...a national state may be a tool in the hands of a national bourgeoisie still firmly under neo-colonial control, yet representing itself as the natural and historically legitimized government of the people.¹⁸

The situation, precisely, on the Caribbean island and the stance adopted by the government representative from Canada.

In Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the nightmarish future society of Gilead, a theocracy, located in the

geographical space the U.S.A. occupies today, the military power denies all rights to its citizens, and especially women. Enforced silence and leaving no means to read and write, along with brutal torture for the slightest deviation from the specific duty thrust upon the women here reduces their life to a subhuman level and does not signify a better alternative to the genocide and ethnic cleansing undertaken by the authorities. The unheroic saga of the women of Gilead like the protagonist Offred's [a female, denied even her own name, called 'of Fred' i.e. belonging to her military master Fred like a slave to breed on] struggle for mere physical existence becomes synonymous in this dystopia with resistance, capture, punishment and visions of escape and meaningful existence with an identity of one's own. However, traces of a woman's private, physical experiences is the only way here to register her as well as the individual citizen's consciousness of existence. What significance can this have in the context of Atwood's writing in the Canadian context? In order to answer this question, we need to understand Atwood's position as a female author in our postcolonial world along the line Ketu Katrak has suggested:

Post-colonial women writers share many of the concerns of their male counterparts especially a history of colonialism and imperialistic control of ex-colonies. In literary representations of 'the personal as political', post-colonial women writers explore the personal dimensions of history rather than the overt concerns with political leadership and nation-states as in the work of their male counterparts. This does not make women writers' concerns any less political; rather, from a feminist standpoint of recognizing the personal, even the intricate and bodily as part of a broader socio-political context, post-colonial women writers enable a reconceptualization of politics....¹⁹

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood has succeeded in presenting a picture of our own world and critiquing it subtly through her bleak vision of the future. In fact, in an interview she had stated that in order to write this novel, she had 'clipped articles out of newspapers' and had accumulated 'a large clippings file of stories supporting the contentions in the book' in such a way that she could proclaim that 'there isn't anything in the book not based on something that has already happened'.²⁰ We must notice that even in this novel situated in the future, Atwood presents Canada as politically correct.

Canada does not interfere when its neighbour, the U.S.A., turns into the totalitarian Gilead in front of its eyes. By stringing together references to Nazi atrocities, labour camps, political conspiracies and policies according to CIA pamphlets, and the concept of repatriation of U.S citizens to their homelands (black people to Africa, Jews to Israel etc.) In order to explain the policies in Gilead, discussed in the 'Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*', Atwood's presentation of 'a partial transcript' of the Symposium on Gileadean Studies being held in the distant future in 2195, with her indictment of Canada's indifference, we can understand that the author is issuing a warning to her fellow-citizens about the crime of disregarding the lessons to be learnt from our historical past.

In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood criticizes the continuing indifference to the desire of and effort to re-evaluate our historical excesses objectively and to learn from them in the context of contemporary Canada as well as any postcolonial nation. As children can give shape to our future, it is important that the present generation of adults take proper care to educate them in the values conducive to it. In contrast, in *Cat's Eye*, schoolchildren in postcolonial Canada are taught the same stereotypes about the civilizing role played by the colonial masters, without any encouragement to review national and international history. Here Miss Lumley, the schoolteacher teaches her students that

'The sun never sets on the British Empire'....In countries that are not the British Empire, they cut out children's tongues....The Indians in Canada did not have the wheel or telephones, and ate the hearts of their eneMies in the heathenish belief that it would give them courage. The British Empire changed all that. It brought in electric lights.²¹

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood's novel of the Canadian past, of the days when the British and the Europeans were coming to settle down in the new country, their hardship, starvation, superstitions, crimes and the brutally harsh punitive measures adopted by the authorities are presented vividly. It inspires us to evaluate the stereotypes taught in *Cat's Eye* anew. Again, in her Booker-winning *Blind Assassin* (2000), the imaginary tale of the city of Sakiel-Norn and the exploitation of child-labour, imperialism and reduction of women to commodities for elite consumption there, is juxtaposed with the female protagonist's struggle for survival against the

acquisitive, male-dominated Canadian life in the twentieth-century. Through the Canadian woman's view of the changing scenario of national economy and local and international politics, Atwood critiques here the basically unchanged nature of the practices and mindsets that have been there in Canada for the last few centuries. And in her most recent futuristic novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), she spins a plot about multinational companies spreading their tentacles all over the world with their ability to sponsor costly scientific research and tempting mankind with the fruits thereof, promising long life and fulfilment of the wildest desires, sparing neither the fellow-citizens of their own First World country of origin, nor citizens in other parts of the world. Decolonisation, in the strict sense of a country gaining freedom from its imperial master, is usually accepted as a standard feature of the modern world and in a country like Canada, it is taken for granted, but Atwood warns through her work against the new forms of exploitation and colonisation of the mind that can destroy the world (and not necessarily merely the Third World countries) if nobody takes note and stops it now.

Margaret Atwood's fiction critiques Canada even as she reveals its vulnerability in the context of a real, natural, and historically accurate reading of the present commercial, neocolonial, potentially self-destructive world. And along with a mirror in which to 'read' its own reflection and take heed, Atwood presents to Canada and the world today a female author's consciousness of identity, integrity, patriotism and survival strategies.

Notes and Reference :

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10 *ibid.*, p.46.

11 *ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

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14 Atwood, *Conversations*, p.227.

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20 Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Seal Books, n.p., 1998, p.393.

21 Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1988, p. 79.

***The Edible Woman*: Margaret Atwood's Proto- Feminist Narrative**

Murari Prasad

As critics have trained their eyes on the feminist prism through which Canadian culture has filtered so much of women's experiences, they have focused on Margaret Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), as a premium piece made of proto-feminist stuff (Potts 2003:np[online]). Although from her first attempt at fiction to the writing of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Atwood's métier has been to champion the voice of the woman across all experience, her delicious as well as metaphorical take on the mid-sixties variety of feminism and consumerism makes *The Edible Woman* a prescient work in the Canadian canon. It not only resonates with the feminist tenets that became fashionable in the 1970s but also predates the concerns which engage contemporary cultural debates. "I didn't invent feminism and it certainly didn't invent me," (cited in *The Guardian*, April 26, 2003) she remarked when the novel began to be appropriated into the feminist canon as a classic indictment of conformity to the norms of patriarchy.

The novel was actually written in '64-'65, when an articulate feminist position on the discrete materiality of being a woman had not begun to crest with combative energy as it did a decade later. In other words, the feminists were not radicalized enough to focus upon erasing sexual inequalities and challenge male domination in spite of Simon de Beauvoir's statement of modern feminism in *The Second Sex* (1949) and the legacy of the 'first wave' of the gender dynamic having built up since the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). Chronologically, Atwood's novel marks the moment when the second wave of feminism with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) had just begun. However, this is not to suggest that the programmatic, polemical agenda shaping the current discourse of gender informs her theme. Atwood's implicit feminism at best promulgates her position on the existential possibilities of womanhood in Canadian society; it is not an offshoot or spin-off of sexual politics.

Later on, Atwood made no bones about her sympathy for the feminist movement. She had vibrant awareness of the woman question which was pushing the sprouts of new consciousness alongside the literary feminism midwifed in the late 1960s by Elaine Showalter, Kate Millett and other godmothers in the field. In an address at York University, Atwood observed:

I will end with a quote from Agnes Macphail, who was not a writer but who was very familiar with at least one literary stereotype. "When I hear men talk about women being the angel of the home, I always, mentally at least, shrug my shoulders in doubt. I do not want to be the angel of the home. I want for other women: absolute equality. After that is secured, then men and women can take their turns at being angels." I myself would rephrase that: "The men and women can take their turns at being human, with all the individuality and variety that term implies." (Cited in Daymond and Monkman 1981:278).

Clearly Atwood identifies and disapproves the given assumptions about male and female roles. Her characters chafe at the dominant gender paradigm governed by these assumptions. In her sharp perception the limitations of cultural conventions surrounding the ideology of gender and her inclination to transcend them are evident. However, she reinscribes the gender issues of her time in her fiction tangentially by selecting and shaping a range of social raw material in such a way as to reflect and illuminate a slice of the current Canadian society. As in the case of earlier generations of male nationalists, for women to take the political and cultural initiatives for self-definition and alternate gender arrangements entailed subversion of the existing ideology and articulation for autonomous selfhood.

The Edible Woman can be described as a proto-feminist narrative in that it was published "just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America" (Atwood 1982:370). The feminist context of the novel is significantly acknowledged by the author. Its thematic concerns go well with the ideological flavour of the time. The protagonist in the novel is pitted against several choices represented by different women characters. The ethos of over-packaged and dessicated society of the 1960s and impending threats to the central sanity and strength of humanity are suggested in the

novel. Alan Dawe, in his perceptive introduction to New Canadian Library edition of the novel, notes:

Thematically and as we shall see, structurally, *The Edible Woman* is a novel about choices. While maintaining its broader implications, it presents these choices in terms of the several alternatives that Margaret Atwood has placed before Marian McAlpin. *The Edible Woman* is, in effect, the intelligent woman's guide to survival in the contemporary world, a world symbolized by the unnamed city in the novel which anyone who has lived there can immediately recognize as Toronto in both its seasons, too hot and too cold. Miss Atwood sets before Miss McAlpin a veritable showcase of life's possibilities, each of which nearly represented by someone this determinedly average girl meets during an average day in her life. She could, to begin with the most attractive example, emulate Ainsley, the "scheming superfemale" who, up to a point, has life's fundamental issues clearly defined. Unlike Marian, who is not very sure of anything, Ainsley knows at least two things for certain: to fulfill herself, every woman needs to have a child, though no woman in her right and independent mind needs a husband. That Ainsley will later become an apostate to her own faith is not something that Marian can guess during the final stages of her questing, but intuitively she remains skeptical of the Ainsley plan.

More to the point, Atwood does not raise common- or-garden gender questions; rather, it would seem, she parodies various strains of feminism, which became popular in the 70s, without shying away from assailing spurious emancipation of women.

To evaluate Atwood's 'feminism' (proto-feminism, I should say) one needs to see how she responds to the world defined for women in the 1960 and the kind of world she envisages. The very title of the novel underscores the passive, subordinate and vulnerable status of women and shapes the gender dynamic of the narrative. We notice that Marian McAlpin is a young graduate working for a market research company: Seymour Surveys. Between two two-year stints at Harvard for a Ph.D. she never finished, Atwood spent a year at Canadian Facts Marketing, which supplied the background for *The Edible Woman*. The upmarket ambience with prevailing consumerism seems to have grown upon the characters. Both men

and women are caught into the vortex of this dehumanized, fast-paced and overly commodified world. The materiality of the urbanised Canadian society including the prevailing gender imbalance comes out prominently in Marian's position at her workplace in the following passage which deserves to be quoted at some length:

At times I'm certain I'm being groomed for something higher up, but as I have only hazy notions of the organizational structure of Seymour Surveys I can't imagine what. The company is layered like an ice-cream, sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle. On the floor above are three executives and the psychologists referred to as the men upstairs, since they are all men—who arrange things with the clients; I've caught glimpses of their offices, which have carpets and expensive furniture and silk screen reprints of Group of Seven paintings on the walls. Below us are the machines—mimeo machines, LBM machines for counting and sorting and tabulating the information; I've been down there too, into that factory-like clatter where the operatives seem frayed and overworked and have ink on their fingers. Our department is the link between the two: As market is a sort of cottage industry, like a hand-knit sock company, these are all housewives working in their spare time and paid by the piece. They don't make much, but they like to get out of the houses. Those who answer the questions don't get paid at all; I often wonder why they do it. Perhaps it's the come-on blurb in which they're told they can help to improve the products they use right in their own homes, something like a scientist. Or maybe they like to have someone to talk to. But I suppose most people are flattered by having their opinions asked. (pp.19-20)

The passage is realistic, yet highly symbolic. Significantly, Atwood presents the first half of the novel in the first person and in the second half, after Marian has given up control, the narrative is in the third person. It does not have complex narrative layers, unlike the Booker-winning novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000), which has four tiers of story. Marian is sensitive to the inadequacies and iniquities of the impermeable workplace where men are a flexible workforce—recruited when needed and axed when time moves on. She finds women's desire to have someone to talk to about their emotional and psychological needs and their potential sense of their sexual

autonomy seems to be running counter to the dominant ideology of gender. These stereotypes define the condition of most women of the time and indicate the extent to which they are forced to subjugate in a sexually-constricted society. Atwood also allows the changing images of women in the novel and scans their mindset and motivation. Marian and Ainsley, though sharing an apartment and living together in a state of "symbiotic adjustment," are contrasted with each other. They don't have much in common in that the former is sober, cool, placid and passive while the latter is modish, flighty and radical. The office-virgins—Emmy, Lucy and Millie—are almost Marian's age and not at all keen to cut loose and go adrift, "After they have travelled enough they would like to get married and settle down" (p.22). But the institution of marriage exemplified by Clara-Joe union is exposed. In Joe's attitude to women Marian finds betrayal of dominant male bias: "He tends anyway to think of all unmarried girls as easily victimized and needing protection. He had several times volunteered fatherly advice to me" (p.35). But Clara is not spared either. Marian finds her lacking in spunk and drive: "Clara simply had no practicality, she wasn't able to control the more mundane aspects of life, like money or getting to lectures on time... her own body seemed somehow beyond her going in its own way without reference to any direction of hers" (pp.35-36).

Atwood does not hold one-dimensional view of male domination and refrains from one-sided denunciation of patriarchy. She holds women like Clara responsible for their commodification and exploitation in the capitalist, consumerist society under her observation in the novel. In her later novels, such as *The Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993), she evokes the levels of manipulation and betrayals that women are capable of meting out to each other. The radical fringe of feminism is represented by Ainsley who wants to have a child without getting married. In her opinion motherhood should be ideally acquired as it "fulfills your deepest femininity" (pp.40-41). She has no qualms about indulging in a carnival of sex with utter promiscuity and hooking a husband who can be passed off as her child's begetter. When Len Slank accuses her of using him for a husband's role, she picks up Fischer Symthe and leads an unconventional life by the standards of much of mid-1960s Toronto. Thus, it is hard to pigeonhole the precise shade of Atwood's commitment to the ideology of gender. Her uncomfortable portrayals of men have been welcomed by men too.

As Linda Hutcheon notes: "As both a Canadian and a woman, she protests any tendency toward easy passivity and naivety; she refuses to allow either Canadians or women to deny their complicity in the power structures that may subject them" (Hutcheon 1988:12). It is difficult to agree with the out-and-out feminist readings of *The Edible Woman* by some critics, for instance Elizabeth Brady (Brady 1975), who sidestep Atwood's comprehensive view of society with regard to gender roles.

The novel problematizes feminist issues by putting the protagonist amidst diverse choices and possibilities of self-realization with their attendant limitations. Does the author steer the novel ahead of the discourse of gender and various strains of feminism in the context of the novel and allow Marian to plump for a viable alternative? This question takes us to the novel's heart of the matter. The theme of sexual exploitation becomes complicated when we notice Peter and Leonard Slank on one hand and Ainsley on the other, preying on opposite sexes. Marian is aghast when she overhears Peter's description of shooting a rabbit:

"I picked it up and Trigger said, 'you know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts fall out'. So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German Steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place." (p.69)

The description of hunting with the recurrence of feminine pronouns melts into a sexual act submerged in the tropes of male power and domination. It is embedded in a discourse that supports the victimization of a stationary, meek and passive target. But Atwood shows Ainsley, too, inverting the gender trajectory along an offbeat track. Marian is alarmed. She lets go of Peter's arm and begins to run. Her sudden display of irrational temper, or bizarre streaks, provokes Peter: "Ainsley behaved herself properly, why can't you? The trouble with you is ... you're just rejecting your femininity." (p.80) Marian's acceptance of Peter's proposal and her meeting with Duncan further problematizes the feminist paradigm in the novel. Her two choices are too far apart. Although she has accepted the panoply of wifely services ["I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you", p.90], she is reluctant to be trapped into the groove of dull

domesticities. Her unease is manifest in her loss of appetite. Duncan's speech has a reflection on Marian's entrapment and dilemma:

Once I went to the zoo and there was a cage with a frenzied armadillo in it going around in figure-eights, just around and around in the same path... They say all caged animals get that way when they're caged, it's a form of psychosis, and even if you set the animals free after they go like that they'll just run around in the same pattern. (p.95)

The image of a "frenzied armadillo" enacts Marian's psychic oscillation between her compliance with adjustment-parameters of conventional wifely role and her instinctive impulsion to liberation and alternate possibility in an alliance with Duncan. By agreeing to marry Peter she seems to have sunk into the stereotyped image of a woman. She almost repeats and reciprocates Peter's views of a stay-at-home wife: "I'd always assumed through high school and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does...I've never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is... she is against it on principle, and life is not run by principles but by adjustments. As Peter says, you can't continue to go around indefinitely, people who aren't married get funny in middle age, embittered or addled or something... But although I'm sure it was in the back of my mind I hadn't consciously expected it to happen so soon or quite the way it did." (p.102) But the inner woman in her is not domiciled in the given dispensation of gender. She begins to suffer from anorexia and identity crisis.

Shaken by psychic unease, and with her metabolism upset, Marian reviews her life-choice and sees through its hollowness. The urge to vibrant empathy with a counterpart in marriage with assured autonomy of her selfhood pulls her away from Peter. Duncan with his intellectually probing nature helps Marian in her salvation and proves a veritable mentor. Through a series of telling situations Atwood shows Marian getting away from Peter's hold. She shakes off her tame marital desires when Joe talks about the tepid impact of university education on women in her engagement party. At the university, a woman "gets the idea that she has a mind, her professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being; when she gets married, her core gets invaded... Her core. The centre of her personality, the thing she's

built up; her image of herself... her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her" (p. 235). Consequently, Marian decides to turn her back on Peter and strike out on her own.

The symbolic confrontation between Marian's viewpoints and those of Peter constitutes signifying transactions in relation to the thematic underpinnings in the novel. It is encapsulated in Marian's baking a cake which is apparently a normal domestic work for a woman. But the cake acquires a gender: "What am I going to put her on? She thought when she had finished" (p.268). She garnishes the cake with delicious ingredients and dishes it up in the mould of an artificially decorated woman which she had herself become in the party scene, exuding a pinch of glamour. The scrumptious cake becomes an edible woman:

Now she had a blank white body. It looked slightly obscene, lying there soft and sugary and featureless on the platter. She set about clothing it, filling the cake-decoration with bright pink icing. First she gave it a bikini, but that was too sparse. She filled in the midriff. Now it had an ordinary bathing-suit, but that still wasn't exactly what she wanted. She kept extending, adding to top and bottom, until she had a dress of sorts. In a burst of exuberance she added a row of ruffles around the neckline, and more ruffles at the hem of the dress. She made a smiling lush-lipped pink mouth and pink shoes to match. Finally she put five pink fingernails on each of the amorphous hands. (p.260)

The cake baked by Marian in the shape of her body for her controlling boyfriend, Peter, is the central metaphor in the book. Atwood critiques the trend of showcasing women's tawdry get-up as a market product in contemporary consumerist society. Marian has sensed Peter's preference for artificial trappings. She sees him clearly for what he is and offers him the cake with cutting remarks:

"You have been trying to destroy me, haven't you," she said. "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork," she added somewhat prosaically. (p.271)

That Peter does not eat the cake and pushes off without even taking a cup of tea shows the unmistakable mutation in Marian.

Eventually she turns out into an iconic female struggling to liberate herself from the shackles of feminine conformity. Her anorexia ends with sudden intensity of appetite and she reverts to her normal responses. At this moment, Atwood brings in a pregnant Ainsley with her husband Fischer Symthe. We encounter the transformed radical feminist into a stickler for femininity: "Marina!" She exclaimed at last, with horror, "You are rejecting your femininity!" (p.272) Marian stares at Ainsley and shoots back: "Nonsense," she said. "It's only a cake." (p.273)

The cake-symbolism not only sustains the narrative spine of the novel at its climactic moment but also carries the thematic burden loaded in the title-image. Atwood's focus falls on Marian who is primed to define her selfhood and aspirations and fend off the proclivities of both Peter and Ainsley. Significantly, both Peter and Ainsley accuse Marian of rejecting her femininity at different stages of her growth and maturity. After her break-off with Peter, Duncan, who has been her mentor, places her on the threshold of new possibilities: "[...] you're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer." (p.281) Marian seems confident of coping with the world in full view of its realities and compromises she has to make for her survival.

While the novelist parodies the extreme brand of feminism represented by Ainsley, she privileges at the same time women's professional and domestic experience and exposes the hierarchy of a male-dominated and less permeable industrial society of the 1960s in Toronto. The issues faced by Marian go beyond the zones of gender and reflect the aspects of modern living affecting both men and women. Clearly, Atwood is not in the company of the feminists pressing the masculine/feminine binary opposition, nor does her novel endorse the discourse of sexual politics which celebrates women's difference as "central to the cultural politics of liberation". However, *The Edible woman* does look forward to a new social order in which neither women nor men are mere titillating sexual merchandise for one another and in which restrictive forces are pulled down to make room for sexual equity and fair play. It takes the proto-feminist tint by describing some subjects as well as anticipating some of the tenets that were widely politicized by the latter-day feminists.

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Resisting Oppression : Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*

Neelima Kanwar

It is not helps, but obstacles, not facilities but difficulties, that make men.

W. Matthews

A desire to resist oppression is implanted in the nature of man.

- Tacitus

Maria Campbell's, *Halfbreed* (1983), a first person chronological narrative, is written with the conviction that it is essential to truly represent the Métis people, including their plight and oppression, especially that of the Métis women. The book originates, as Campbell herself puts it, in the need "... to tell ... what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams."¹

Besides writing about her personal agonising experiences and joys, Campbell also subtly exposes the White oppressive tendencies which have "... devalued so many conventions, traditions and institutions and ... have damaged so many lives, dislocated so many homes."² In this respect, the novel gains political overtones. In this book the sense of celebration of Native life is equally strong as the ordeals faced by them. In fact, in this narrative:

The complex, multi-dimensioned relation of Métis, treaty Indians, White communities, priests, nuns, residential and local schools, are all briefly but tellingly uncovered and explored. Domestic life, weddings and funerals, dances and feasts, the work of physical and community survival, doing without, personal loss, living with grief, adjusting to dashed hopes ... all map into a cluster of personalities and events which, accumulating and driven to climax over the course of Campbell's story, become progressively more familiar in the context of current bitterness.³

Halfbreed is an autobiographical narrative which shatters the myth of assimilation with the Whites. The novel is the story of Maria, whose life as a Métis child in northern Saskatchewan and as a young woman in the city is depicted. It is disguised commentary on the hostile attitude of the non-Natives towards the Natives. Maria Campbell's style reminds one of the Native oral-tradition where colloquial language is blended with the written prose. "In *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell seems to create a continuum between oral and discursive forms, thereby destabilizing clear-cut boundaries and establishing a third space beyond binary oppositions."⁴ In spite of being born to one half-white parent the protagonist Maria is not accepted in the mainstream White society. Her attempt to be accommodated through marriage with a White man fails miserably. The book brings out at length the precarious position of a Native woman in contemporary Canada, and also attempts to "... present a critique of the colonial and neo-colonial regimes to educate people about their mode of functioning and ... call for united fight against the oppressive Imperialist regimes to bring about a better social order."⁵

Campbell places her experiences in a proper historical perspective by giving at the outset the history of her race i.e. the Métis or the Halfbreeds who came to be called as such because of their half Native and half White origin. Maria explains why the Métis came to Saskatchewan in 1860s; "The Halfbreeds came here from Ontario and Manitoba to escape the prejudice and hate that comes with the opening of a new land" (p. 3). These people settled at Duck Lake, Batoche, St. Louis and St. Laurent. With no government and no law and order they formed their own administration. In 1870s and 1880s, however, the government intervened but it equated the Halfbreeds who had been living on the land for many a years with new White settlers. The law demanded that they had to live on their own land for three more years before they could claim it. The Métis had hoped for a better treatment from the administration. Even at this stage, Maria reveals, the Métis were not against the regulations of the State but the way of its *modus operandi*.

The Halfbreeds were not the only ones offended with the federal government. The Indians and the poor Whites too had grievances against the authorities. When their joint petitions and resolutions sent to Ottawa didn't receive any attention, Dumont without Riel's knowledge led the Halfbreeds to the Battle of Duck

Lake. As a result of this Ottawa formed a committee to look into the complaints of Halfbreeds. Campbell regrets that had this committee been formed earlier much bloodshed and violence could have been prevented. Maria strongly condemns the White authorities which sent eastern troops under General Middleton to Saskatchewan wherein "eight thousand troops, five hundred NWMP and white volunteers from throughout the Territories, plus a Gatling gun, arrived to stop Riel, Dumont and one hundred and fifty Halfbreeds" (p. 6).

The fate of the Métis is not very different from the other Natives. They too are the victims of oppressive and discriminatory laws of the government which favour the Whites only. Maria discloses how because of unfair laws on homesteads, the Halfbreeds lost their land claims. This dispossession made them squatters. They shifted to crown lands where they got branded as "Road Allowance People" since without land they had to live on the roadsides and depend upon welfare for the living. And as Penny Petrone points out: "With the loss of the land they had always thought of as their own, they soon discovered that they had also lost the source of their identity."⁶ The hunters and trappers so proud of their skill and dexterity experienced failure. They had seen their elders being defeated during Riel Rebellion and now their own failure as farmers made them feel too ashamed of their being. This drifted them towards alcoholism. Maria Campbell feels pained to think how her proud and happy people were reduced to shame for being Métis.

Maria gives details about her ancestors (mélange of Scottish, French, Creole, English and Irish) and familiarizes the readers with her Great Grandpa, Great Grandma—Cheechum, Grandpa Campbell, Grannie Dubuque, father and mother. Maria recognizes the role played by these respective persons in her life especially Cheechum with whom she shared a special relationship, whose philosophy shaped Maria's *Weltanschauung* i.e. worldview and also ultimately saved Maria from ruin and dé bâcle by saving her from drifting into despair.

Unlike most other narratives by Native women a major part of the book gives a glimpse into a happy Métis family and Campbell's own happy childhood. When Maria was born in April 1940, the father was disappointed because he was expecting a boy. This, however, didn't deter his spirit to raise Maria as the best trapper and hunter. Maria had a wholesome upbringing where her father taught her

hunting skills, her mother groomed her to be a lady and Cheechum, Maria's "best friend and confidante" (p. 16), taught her how to live life and shaped her worldview as well. Maria remembers the whole family as a special single unit where even the grandparents had their distinguished place. She says, "Daddy would be busy in the corner, brushing fur until it shone and glistened, while Mom bustled around the stove. Cheechum would be on the floor smoking her clay pipe and the small ones would roll and fight around her like puppies" (p. 17). Maria's parents had enough time to spend with children, and as a result had healthy and friendly relations with them. Parents taught them their traditional knowledge of herbs, roots and tracks. Kids also learned dance and music from them. The parents transferred to them the Halfbreed history in the form of stories. Likewise folk-tales and mythology also got engrained in the children.

The strength of Maria's carefree and nonchalant childhood was the father. He doted on his wife and was very respectful towards her. This made Maria and other siblings feel secure in his company which contributed towards their healthy thinking. Maria and other family members really missed the father, when from early October till Christmas he went away trapping: "How we missed him! It was as if part of us was gone with him, and we were not complete until he had returned" (p. 53). Puddings were made and the tree decorated, when in the middle of the things the father entered "with a full-grown beard and a sack full of fur on his back" (p. 54). He kissed the wife, hugged the children and even made pancakes for everybody. Overall, Maria's childhood accounts are full of joyous family get togethers with the feeling of caring and sharing being the most dominant.

Maria's interaction with the White Christians had some impact on her but it could not trouble her the way many Native children were troubled. Once again it was her father who proved quite influential in saving her from agony. Rejection of these Christians' pseudo-concern and pity by her father, made her learn the value of self-respect. Initially she envied the Christian children for their better clothes, better eatables and a better standard of living. Later, however, she found them to be cold, distanced and apathetic people who looked down upon the non-Whites. Maria silently questioned the Whites' perception of their own religion which could not make them good human beings.

The Christians were quite insensitive and hostile towards the religious practices of the Halfbreeds. Maria remembers how in one of the services Old Hashoo took up his drum and chanted. The minister quite disparagingly asked him to leave, and as a result the whole congregation of the Métis people left. For them their dignity, unity and self-respect was more precious than the Church. Maria also remembers the Church's representative priest as a cunning and greedy fellow who always arrived at the dinner time to have the goodies. In the churchyard he didn't allow the Halfbreed children to pick up the luscious strawberries since they belonged to the Godman – priest. However, he himself took things from Indian's Sundance Pole which belonged to the Great Spirit. This hypocrisy and paradox in the priest's behaviour made Maria reject their religion and its practices. So quite early in her life she learned to value her own religion and culture and judiciously located the limitations in others' practices.

During the Christmas, the Whites left boxes with already worn clothes and eatables in them, in front of the Halfbreed houses. Maria's father picked them up and burned them. For him his dignity and pride were more important than the White pity and false sympathy. To justify their own religious charity and conscience the Christians left the things for the Halfbreeds. Maria at first felt bad on losing the goodies. However, in the school she realized the importance of her father's actions. When the White kids in the school made fun of the Halfbreed children who wore the leftover clothes, Maria really felt thankful to her father who saved her from gross humiliation and embarrassment.

Maria's mother, however, was a staunch Christian. She prayed regularly and even if there was little money at home, she gave money to the Church. When the new Church came in the neighbourhood, in spite of the father and Cheechum's objection, she had gone to the Church with Maria. However, there somebody said an indecent thing to her after which she never visited the Church again. But she also did not disclose what she had heard. This made Maria more critical of Christianity as a religion. When mother died, the priest refused her a proper burial since father had forgotten to administer the last sacrament before she died. The pain caused to the mother and the insensitive treatment that the mother's body received made Maria lose faith in Christianity completely.

Maria's joyous childhood and adolescence, however, was not unaffected by racial discrimination. She particularly remembers the prejudice of the White town people. Whenever the Halfbreeds went to sell Seneca roots and berries in the town, the Whites hurled insults at them. The Whites accused them of stealing and watched over their actions. A certain change came over the Halfbreed adults as they entered the town. They looked down and even walked with their heads down. Children with their grannies also marched in the similar manner. Maria as a child found it quite humiliating and she decided that she would always walk with her head high up.

Even the Whites' literature was full of racism which either didn't mention the Métis at all or didn't give them any perspective. Maria's mother read Shakespeare, Dickens, Sir Walter Scott and Longfellow to her children. Mother's accounts, no doubt stirred Campbell's imagination but they also made her believe that the protagonists were Whites only. So when all the cousins played together Cleopatra and Caesar and the White-skinned, red-haired cousin became Cleopatra, the White neighbourhood also laughed at them, mocking at their play action. They assumed that the Métis were unable to understand, appreciate and enact the roles of Cleopatra and Caesar. James S. Frideres also comments, "The subjugation and control of Native Canadians has been continued through a process of individual and institutional racism."⁷

The humiliation experienced by the Halfbreed menfolk because of racial discrimination made them alcoholics. Inebriation made them temporarily forget injustice received from the Whites. During the summer get togethers all the money earned got drained out in liquor. Sometimes the White men misbehaved with the Halfbreed women. But instead of protecting their own women, the Half-breed men were harsh towards their own women. Their own complexes and inability to confront the White racism made them beat their own women. In fact, it was their frustration and despair which made them ill-treat their spouses.

Maria entered the White world through Grannie Dubuque who was quite influenced by the White way of living since she worked for the White people. When Marla was seven years old Grannie Dubuque arranged for her to stay in a residential school in Beauval. Maria recalls that during that part of her life she was "lonely" and "frightened." She experienced exploitation in the school. There

she was asked to pray, and clean the dormitories and hallways. And ironically, there was no study at all. Even for speaking in the Native language, there was severe punishment. The Whites could not understand/realize that "Language would have opened the windows of opportunity for cultural communication and understanding."⁸ Her father then took her out because a new school had come up in the neighbourhood. However, things were no better here. The White children's ridicule made the Métis kids ashamed of their poverty. Even the White pedagogues were unsympathetic. Maria remembers that in a particular class the teacher discussed the Natives as poor. The teacher read out from St. Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 3 to 12: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven." Maria took it to be an umbrage at the Native and Halfbreed people and retorted; "Big deal. So us poor Halfbreeds and Indians are to inherit the Kingdom of heaven, but not till we're dead. Keep it!" (p. 61). Maria further recollects how the lunch breaks were the most humiliating, terrifying and insulting. The Whites had cakes, cookies, jams and eggs which the poor Halfbreeds didn't even eat at Christmas. For the lunch, the Métis kids usually had gophers and bannock. This contrast led to a feeling of deprivation and frustration, and Maria even troubled her parents demanding things they couldn't afford. It was Cheechum only who made Maria see the things in a correct perspective. She made Maria understand that the interaction with the Whites was never a healthy experience for the Halfbreeds. She averred that the Whites always incited the Métis with their valuable things to create the rift among the Halfbreeds. So it was unfair to trouble the parents for useless luxuries.

Maria also saw the 'practical' application of selfish 'friendship' of the Whites as explained by Cheechum. She experienced betrayal by the Whites at home itself. A Whiteman and his wife were Maria's father's good customers for both meat and homemade Whiskey. After the fellow won the elections, he started instructing on morality and the evils of drinking. When father invited them for drinks, they refused. The very next day the fellow came with the police to raid the house. The police searched for whiskey and meat since it was illegal to keep them. Maria rejoices that the White fellow failed in his attempt because of Cheechum's foresightedness. Cheechum had made everybody hide the meat and whiskey. So when the police

searched, there was nothing they could get hold of. As such the whole family was saved from disgrace, dishonour as well as destitution.

The Natives and the Halfbreeds have always been politically conscious. They have always strived for the betterment of their fellow beings but could not unite themselves earlier. Maria's childhood also saw the beginning of political unity among the Halfbreeds and the Natives. But she also witnessed failure within the organisation because of the White's policy of divide and rule as well as because of the insensitivity of certain fortune-hunters among the Halfbreeds. Though the Métis were united they did not have proper leadership. When Jim Brady came, people saw hope of regaining their own land. His arrival excited even octogenarian Cheechum who encouraged the father to attend the meetings and become politically active. Only Grannie Campbell dissuaded the father from the meetings as she believed that any association with the Whites brought only despair and disillusionment. Cheechum, however, averred that efforts had to be made constantly with vigour in spite of a few abortive attempts. She believed only then the father could tell his children that he did try to change the circumstances and about various other occurrences. Cheechum's perspective was definitely correct as Maria says, "How proud I was of my Dad!" (p. 73). Gradually the father got really involved in the meetings and even Maria got initiated into politics at quite a young age.

In the school the White students made fun of Campbells for their father's political activities. Young White kids taunted them, "Saskatchewan has a new Riel. Campbells have quit poaching to take up the new rebellion" (p. 74). Maria advised her young siblings not to react to such callous statements since she had full faith in her father's activities. Later, however, the father and the daughter both faced disappointment from the Métis themselves. The Whites offered Jim Brady and other political activists government jobs which they readily picked up and lost all interest in their own people's welfare. The selfishness and deception of his political colleagues disheartened the father.

The futility of his attempts made the father "another defeated man" (p. 75). The pain caused by his own people pushed him towards liquor. Gradually, her father's temperament and attitude changed. Maria recalls with regret and great pain that now they had to tolerate

poverty along with a morose atmosphere at home. Initially even if they were indigent they at least had peace, laughter and bonding at home. Her father had become a frustrated and an angry man who started hitting the mother also. Once he even slapped Cheechum. Though afterwards he did try to make up, still, the times had changed. Maria blames the Whites and the unscrupulous and fraudulent Métis for the deterioration in their lives.

The grandparents play a prominent and an influential role in the life of Native children. Their philosophy helps children in their crucial moments. Apart from the father, it was her great grandmother Cheechum who played a very significant role in Maria's life. Cheechum was a staunch Native who refused to sleep on a bed or eat off the table because for her these were not a part of their culture. Cheechum's little possessions added to Maria's wonder and amazement. Maria always looked for an excuse to sleep with Cheechum because, as she says, "There was a special smell that comforted me when I was hurt or afraid" (p. 17).

Cheechum also moulded and influenced Maria's religious beliefs and thinking. Maria did not find any peace in religious practices of Church and prayers. She was more comfortable with Cheechum's philosophy which was "practical, soothing and exciting . . ." (p. 81). Cheechum asserted that destiny could not be altered, therefore, one should always be prepared for its various unpredictable courses. Cheechum's spiritual wisdom avered that the soul within the human body experiences heaven and hell on earth itself. Cheechum, therefore, emphasised the need to check and control one's words, thoughts and actions. Her ". . . sentences set forth a deep strong, moral, and spiritual vision and understanding"⁹ in Maria. These ideas appealed more to Maria than the ritualistic worship of the Christians.

Cheechum had a very strong intuitive power. Maria believes that she knew about Maria's destiny and in her own ways made Maria strong enough to face it and survive it as well. Cheechum taught her to be a proud Halfbreed. When the adults walked with heads down in the town, Cheechum encouraged Maria to rebel against the self-humiliating act. She said, "Never forget that, my girl. You always walk with your head up and if anyone says

something then put out your chin and hold it higher" (p. 37). It was Cheechum's inspiration which gave Maria the strength to fight against various odds.

Cheechum made Maria realize her duty as a Halfbreed person. When Maria complained about the lack of luxurious things which the Whites had, Cheechum made her see things in a correct perspective through an anecdote—the Halfbreeds came to live in this particular land for they wished for an independent living. For this they were ready for any type of sacrifice but a few of the Métis said, "I want good clothes and horses and you no-good Halfbreeds are ruining it for me" (p. 51). And they went forth to grab things from the Métis so as to please the Whites. Cheechum explained how the Whites divide the Métis, make them hate each other and ultimately try to rule the Halfbreeds; "They try to make you hate your people" (p. 51). Maria learned her first important political lesson from Cheechum—unite with your own people, respect them, defend them and fight for their dignity. From that day onwards Maria always stood for her Halfbreed people. Though as Christine Welsh mentions "... very few Métis people spoke about being Métis and there was widespread denial of Métis identity among the generations of Métis ..."¹⁰ yet, Maria from that day onwards always spoke about and stood for Métis people as she comprehends that "The idea of resistance is ... to construct an oppositional discourse"¹¹ to subvert and interrogate the European unjust system.

The tragedy that shattered Maria's secure and happy world was her mother's sudden death. Unable to bear the loss the father started staying away for days together. The responsibility of the whole house fell upon Maria at the tender age of twelve. Maria had to take care of altogether eight children, including the newly born. To run the household even her brother Jamie at the age of eleven, started to work from 4:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. At this critical time Cheechum again proved to be the pillar of strength. She always encouraged Maria to be a dutiful person. On the father's return Cheechum succeeded in awakening his lost sense of responsibility. The father then found a job with a farmer. Since Maria was the eldest child, she had to do all the labour—baking, cooking, washing, gardening, canning, sewing, mending, etc. At this juncture, Cheechum who was 96 decided to leave the home since she didn't wish to be a burden. At this stage, Maria suffered not only from physical exhaustion but also from emotional vacuum in the absence of Cheechum.

The father tried to keep a housekeeper so that all the children could attend the school. But poverty proved to be Maria's bane when housekeepers started asking for enormous money. Maria combined school and the care of young ones in a way which was highly moving to say the least. She brought young ones to school and tied them to trees. Everyone took turns to go and attend to them. When the teachers discovered the arrangement, the relief people were immediately informed. To save the children being taken away by relief people the father immediately shifted the family twenty-five miles away from the farm. When he was locking the door of the home he had built with passion and dreams for his family, the despair, loneliness and feeling of being lost was complete within the family. As Maria recalls, "I remember Dad locking the door of the home he had built for his family. The house looked so lonely; it looked the way we felt" (p. 85). The new home lacked the warmth, affection and earnestness of the earlier home but Maria decided to make the best of what she received.

When the school reopened Maria felt free again. She tried to live childhood years in those few hours. But her joy was tarnished by the demon of racial discrimination in the school. The pedagogues made derogatory racist remarks to the Halfbreed children. One ruthless teacher did not even spare six years old Peggie for her pronunciation accented in the Native language. As a result the little child even started to wet the bed. Another incident of White cruelty Maria recalls was regarding her brother Robbie who was generally a tough boy. Robbie was found to have unclean ears (though he had taken bath that day but had forgotten to clean his ears). The teacher so cruelly used a scrubbrush to scrub his hands, neck and ears that they started to bleed. On hearing Robbie's whimpers and seeing his condition, Maria slapped the teacher real hard. Self-respecting and strong Maria refused to accept such a brutal and inhuman treatment. Maria's stand made all the other racist pedagogues behave properly with the Métis bairns especially the Campbells. Her strength and belief in herself earned her a victory in the school itself.

After a while, when Grannie Dubuque came to stay with the children for sometime, Maria got relief from her overtaxed life. Grannie's motherly affection overwhelmed all the children. Under her womanly care, the children really blossomed. Maria remembers her as the greatest storyteller who beautifully amalgamated strict

Catholicism with Indian beliefs. This way the children learned Christianity as well as the ancient Indian rituals. With Grannie at home Maria got some time for herself and she first noticed boys at the age of fourteen. She, however, didn't show any interest in them because Cheechum had said, ". . . Don't try to impress them, let them impress you. Be yourself and do what you want. Someday you'll find the one man you belong to—when it happens you'll know" (p. 97). Cheechum thus, gave her another lesson in dignity, in relation to menfolk this time.

In spite of a few short spells of relaxation, life for Maria was a continuous struggle. She often contemplated on how to improve the condition of the family. The emotion of sacrifice so strong in the father became an integral and indispensable part of Maria's personality as well. To take care of her siblings she left the school and picked up a job. So with the father, Jamie and Maria working, the family condition improved a lot. Maria was delighted to provide her younger sisters with a few pretty dresses which they had always eyed but had not asked for. Though Maria felt happy with the family, yet she missed the school. Maria's father judged her disappointment and brought home Sarah, a widow in late thirties, so that Maria could attend the school. After her initial resistance and fear Maria accepted Sarah. She got some time to be just herself, i.e. she could read and ride.

Maria's life entered a new phase which was marked by confusion, rebellion and going astray. For some time she forgot the lessons Cheechum had taught her. She and Smoky, a half-breed, started going around. Maria didn't realize what she was inheriting unconsciously from these outings. The European party-culture affected her so much so that she forgot who she was and what her duty towards her own people was. When the father learned about her liaison, he was furious. Maria was unable to appreciate her father's concern for a growing daughter. He wished to protect her from the ills of society but was unable to do so. Fed up with the father's nagging Maria became almost a rebel who didn't consider her father significant enough to keep a check on her. The father-daughter relationship changed immensely. She kept on going to dances just to annoy him. Her despair at home and influence of the Whites made her hurt even Smoky when he proposed marriage. She said, "Marry you? You've got to be joking! I'm going to do something with my life besides make more Half-breeds" (p. 117).

There was so much confusion in her that she didn't even know why she was behaving in such an absurd manner. Her frustration at her sludgy condition made her love as well as hate her Métis fellow beings. Whenever she thought of her life with Smoky she "saw only shacks, kids, no food and both . . . fighting" (p. 117). Maria at this juncture, had mixed feeling towards her Métis heritage. She loved her people for their sincerity and boisterous nature but hated them for their indigence and penury.

In spite of Maria's mental confusion, her sense of responsibility and sacrifice towards the young ones forced her to take a decision which altered her life forever. She was driven by poverty to a suicidal act as she decided to marry a White rich man who would look after her young brothers and sisters as well. So when she met Darrel she knew perfectly well what her course of action should be. Though her father and Cheechum were strongly opposed to the match, Maria feigned pregnancy and got married at the age of 15: "I had a husband and I could keep my brothers and sisters. I was fifteen years old" (p. 120).

Maria's real trail of suffering started after her marriage. The poverty of childhood though ended here but another cycle of misery, deprivation and hurt began for Maria. Darrel proved to be a cheat. Before marriage he posed to be a rich man who owned a house but later, took Maria to a rented apartment. Sometimes later he even started hitting Maria whenever he was in a mood. Gradually he started staying out late and would disappear for days together. Even when Maria was expecting Lise, Darrel hit her quite regularly. Still, Maria hung on to him because otherwise her whole family would have come to the streets. However, after Maria's father gave Darrel a good beating, Darrel really behaved himself. Everything got settled and everyone was happy. Yet Maria's gut feeling warned her of something disastrous. She felt that there was lull before the storm. And her intuition came true when one day the relief people arrived and took away the children. This broke Maria completely and for days together she remained in a dazed state. She learnt later that, in fact, it was Darrel only who in a clandestine manner had called up the relief people to pick up the children from home while he was away.

Later, Darrel proposed to leave for Vancouver. On the way, they stopped at Kristen, Alberta at the place of Bonny, Darrel's sister.

She had a strong racist attitude. Bonny forced Darrel to leave Maria and one morning Bonny kicked Maria out of the house. Though Maria was aware of her husband's wicked and indifferent nature, desertion was the last thing she had expected.

All alone with the baby, Maria found a temporary haven with a Chinese restaurant owners who too were the victims of White atrocities. While Maria was staying with the Chinese restaurant owners, Maria saw the racist attitude of the Whites even towards the Chinese. The Europeans had the audacity to call the Chinese "chinks" or "yellow bastards" even in the Chinese restaurant. Maria concluded that the Europeans were racist by nature itself, a view shared by many:

The non-Whites in Canada share many similar experiences despite their diverse cultures and ethnicity. First, there is the history of their colonial oppression, regardless of whether they experienced it in the Caribbean or India or Pakistan or Sri Lanka. Secondly, there is the common experience of racism faced by them in Canada.¹²

However, fear of Bonny made Maria patch up with Darrel again. As expected, with Darrel once again began a phase of despair, poverty, frustration and suffering. Darrel took her to the ugliest and dirtiest place of Vancouver. No matter how much Maria tried, the apartment was always filled with cockroaches. Even the toilet was common with the residents of other apartments, where "The most rejected-looking people would be waiting their turns with . . ." (p. 132) her. She even felt and saw her own plight; emotional turmoil, physical suffering and mental agony in her neighbours. She says, "I wondered, as I waited, whether anyone of them had parents who loved them, or if they had ever laughed, or loved, or hated" (p. 132). Maria was in a place where people were in constant stupor, nothing seemed to affect them and they had become emotionally numbed. She had nobody to identify with, or even spend sometime with. Besides, her relationship with Darrel was as good as over. Darrel didn't think her to be significant enough to be told what he did, whether he had a job or not and didn't even talk to her. Though Maria tried to keep herself busy with Lise, yet she felt herself in a vacuum. Darrel again left her with no money. She realized her mistake in trusting Darrel. Nevertheless, it made her strong to face the world and she decided to earn her own living.

At Vancouver Maria hovered between hope and despair. Her despair took a new turn when she contacted Lil whom she had met in a party. Maria knew what she was heading for, yet, her dreams (toothbrush, milk, bowl of fruits, cookies, etc.) made her enter an extremely ugly world. Still she felt guilty for her dreams and her efforts to achieve them. She says, "Dreams are so important in one's life, yet when followed blindly they can lead to the disintegration of one's soul" (p. 133). Maria entered the sordid, ugly world of prostitution. Maria was aware of her vulnerable position. She never cried because she knew that if she ever tried to shed a tear, she would never be able to pull herself up again. To deal with her pain and agony she got hooked on to the drugs. She lost total control of herself and even forgot about Lise. After sometime, Maria shifted her job as a keep of one political leader whose name she doesn't give out and refers to him as Mr. _____. Her hollowness and loneliness increased here all the more. She "... was like a block of ice . . . had no feelings" (p. 138). However, her meeting with Ray changed her life for better. With Ray's help and her will Maria got out of her addiction to drugs.

Still Maria was not out of the ugly world entirely. With Ray's help she did earn lots of money, but through smuggling. Then she decided to lead a clean life and took Lise to Calgary. However, she got a shock as she was unable to find a job for herself. This was because she had no education and was without any job experience. Soon she was back to depression, pills and drinks. Ultimately she had to go back to Vancouver and put Lise in the convent once again. Her life went back to earlier troublesome and miserable living. Her stay with Trapper just invited beatings and nothing else. Then one fine night Cheechum's words echoed, "You can have anything you want if you want it bad enough" (p. 144). These words reawakened her. Maria was then determined to come out of the rut she was in.

Again Ray saw her through her addiction and even provided her with a cook's job in a ranch. So by the time Maria was twenty years old she had already experienced poverty, prostitution, drug addiction, marriage and motherhood. After a while the people around the ranch became nasty, as such Maria shifted to Calgary to pick up a housekeeping job. Her determination to improve her lot made her join a school. But the load of work and school burdened her too much. Depression set in and she tried to commit suicide. Her torment, agony and loneliness almost compelled her to abort second

pregnancy. However, the mother in her prevented such an inhuman deed.

Maria's extremely humble condition forced her to contact the welfare people whom she really detested. In her first attempt she did not receive any money from the welfare. On Marion's suggestion the second time Maria wore "a ten-year-old threadbare red coat, with old boots and a scarf" (p. 155). This time she was lucky to receive vouchers for groceries. The whole episode humiliated Maria and she realized why her parents and Cheechum were so dead against the Welfare. The relief people gave the money but took away the pride, dignity and self-respect of a person. The White welfare was hypocritical. It never helped the Métis but only degraded them.

After a long and bitter struggle Maria's revival began. When she met David, Cheechum's words "Someday, somewhere, you'll meet a man who'll grow old with you and you'll know him when you meet him" (p. 160) came true. David's boisterous, outgoing as well as sympathetic nature enlivened Maria again. Though even now travails of life kept casting their shadows. No sooner did she settle down in life, than the news of Lil's arrest and trials of Lil's accomplices paved way for depression and anxiety in Maria. Even after the trials were over Maria was unable to collect herself and had a nervous breakdown because of tension. She had to be hospitalised and was released only after she started attending AA meetings to ensure that she comes out of alcoholism.

AA gatherings altered the whole outlook of Maria. She comprehended and discerned Cheechum's words, saw the indispensability of unity among the Halfbreeds and her concerns grew from personal to larger social issues. She got politically active in various meetings concerning the Métis problems. She perceived and realized her *raison d'être*

However, Maria's awakening and activism were not appreciated by her own Métis men. She experienced sexist bias even in political activism. Eugene who talked openly against the Whites couldn't tolerate Maria voicing her opinions regarding the Whites. Gradually, she saw the result of the European influence on the attitude of the Native men towards the Native women. She says, "I realize now that the system that fucked me up fucked up our men even worse. The missionaries had impressed upon us the feeling that the women

were a source of evil. This belief, combined with the ancient Indian recognition of the power of women, is still holding back the progress of our people today" (p. 168).

Fortunately Maria also met a few Native males who could sympathize with the Native woman's problems, for example, Stan Daniels who in spite of being the victim of "Savagel Savage" shouts of the Whites had managed to keep his serenity intact and had not turned into an alcoholic. His attitude was not infected and tainted like that of the majority of the Native men. He was really concerned about the Native girl on the street. "He understood how the men in prison felt—it was good to get temporary relief away from their problems. He understood how women ended up on the street, and the things that they could not talk about, and how the Indian women felt about being abandoned by their men" (p. 169). With people like Stan around Maria found new companions. She matured as a human being as well as a politically aware person. She realized that "Women's awareness about development is basic to her empowerment. For achieving this awareness the most important ingredient is the necessity of a healthy environment about her perception by the society and the community in which she is born."¹³

Maria Campbell's difficulties pave way for her transformation. Her individual ordeals, lead to her political activism as she discerns that without her own people she cannot/does not exist as an individual and that her respect lies in being respected as a Métis.

Campbell's book clearly conveys that any writer is affected by not only her personal life but also by her larger historical context. So what is true of Ngugi Wa' Thiong'O in the African context is also true for Maria's writing in the Canadian context. Therefore, as Harish Narang puts it; "A piece of literature representing one of the highest forms of development of human sensibility is a social phenomenon. . . . It is . . . a deliberate act of social communication Any serious work of literature, created as it is within the framework of existing social relations, is not only a living document of the contemporary happenings but also of the historical processes underlying them"¹⁴ is quite evident in *Halfbreed*. This text is undeniably a representative of how author, literature and politics inextricably blend together to depict the contemporary issues in particular milieu.

Reading Campbell's *Halfbreed* is a richly rewarding experience. The narrative is indeed a vibrant, vivid and incisive portrayal of the life and world of the Halfbreeds. The book does not portray the Halfbreeds as merely suffering victims but as joyous and vibrant people. The narrative is full of moments of laughter and amusement. Maria describes a particular incident where an old lady instructed her "never to look at animals or people when babies were made" (p. 21) otherwise Maria would go blind. This she repeated with great authority to her cousins. After a few days one of her cousins looked at two dogs and screamed in terror. All the children became almost hysterical in fear. When all reached home Cheechum made them aware of the reality. Another funny incident Maria recalls is how the priest made old Cadieux leave drinking even though for a while. The priest gave old Cadieux's daughter a bottle with Virgin Mary inside it. So when religious Cadieux saw Virgin Mary he threw all his homemade brew. He even swore to leave drinking altogether. However, he was back to boozing in a week's time.

Maria recalls various incidents which filled her life with fun and humour. In a particular incident, Maria remembers, she and her siblings taught a lesson to the greedy Father who never let children have strawberries from Churchyard but himself picked up things from Indian's Sundance Pole belonging to the Great spirit. The children took a wire and strung it across two trees on the either side of the footpath. They strung a wire a couple of feet further as well. So when the Father arrived he fell down and got up to fall once again. Maria also remembers one of the hunting trips with Dad, Jeremy (mother's uncle) and Chi Pierre (Jeremy's friend). When they reached the National Park, the Elk were calling. Dad tried to warn Jeremy and Chi of the approaching Elk but in their argument they didn't hear Dad. Dad shot at Elk and when he and Maria looked around, Jeremy was on top of the tree yelling "Get off, it's my true" (p. 62) and Chi was trying to climb the tree screaming, "I'm your brother-in-law. He'll kill me" (p. 62). Finally, Jeremy fell down as the branch broke down and Chi himself climbed to the top.

Like other narratives by Native women, Maria Campbell's book is also a trenchant critique of the White establishment. She reveals with much detail and lucidity how the settler's racist attitude and exploitation keeps the Métis sunk in poverty. She discloses the vicious circle of racism, poverty, lack of education, lack of equal

opportunities, which leads to alcoholism. Through her personal experiences only she makes the reader see the direct connection between the various problems of the Natives and the Métis.

Apart from her personal experiences, Maria also records many other instances observed by her and which hurt the Métis. White racism, Maria stresses, is often manifested in acts of cruelty. She cites an incident in a restaurant where two four and eight years old Native boys came in. To reach the toilet, they had to cross the crowd. As they started, one of the White men yelled, "Watch it! The bows and arrows are coming" (p. 158). The men started to laugh to make the kids really uncomfortable. It was Maria's angry shout which made the White men quiet. The humiliation faced at a tender age creates a fear inside the Native children which sometimes stays even when they grow up. This was evident because the young boys' parents preferred to stay out. Maria understood their behaviour also, "... I understood about these boys' parents—it was easier for them to stay in the car. If they came out from under their blankets, they'd have to face reality, ugly as it was" (p. 159).

Racism does not get restricted to common everyday experiences. It assumes enormous proportions. Maria discloses how even the history is misrepresented in the movies. In a particular movie Louis Riel was depicted as a lunatic and Gabriel Dumont as a fool. In the movie only NWMP and General Middleton did all the heroic things. Such misrepresentation Maria feels tarnishes the image (reality) of the Indians and the Halfbreeds. Maria's experience reminds one of Lee Maracle's experience in the school where the Native history was again misrepresented. Louis Riel here also was presented as a madman.

Maria's brief experience as a prostitute acquainted her with many a White politicians. These she found to be extremely hypocritical in nature, she concluded that neither the poor White nor the Native poor people can look up to them for any help or sympathy. She even said:

... poor people both white and Native, who are trapped within a certain kind of life, can never look to the business and political leaders of this country for help. Regardless of what they promise, they'll never change things, because they are involved in and perpetuate in private the very things that they condemn in public. (p. 137)

Charles Paris, a White, reveals the politics of the White leaders:

We said to the Native Community, 'You can't have those things; they're pagan rites', and so we took away from the Native communities, under our law, those distributions of fish and the goods of the earth, as they shared them among their people. And so the Native community was denied their rights, in the name of our way of looking at things.¹⁵

The politicians had introduced welfare. However, this welfare had only the interests of the Whites in mind. Cheechum was the first one who guarded Maria against the White hypocrisy. The Whites exchanged self-respect and dignity for welfare. Cheechum said, "... when the government gives you something, they take all that you have in return—your pride, your dignity, all the things that make you a living soul" (p.159). Cheechum's words proved true when Maria needed the welfare money. She had to act dumb, stupid, ignorant and pretend to be on the mercy of the Whites before she really received some money from the relief system. The insensitivity of the relief people hurt her badly. She also remembered how the welfare placed Maria's brothers and sisters in permanent foster homes. The father and Maria were not even allowed to know about their whereabouts. The welfare thus, becomes oppressive in practice causing frustration, hopelessness, and anxiety both to the children and the other members of the family.

Maria also strongly condemns the Whites' manipulative tendencies. They manipulated the Native poverty and money became the instrument to disunite the Indians and the Halfbreeds as well as break the Métis unity. Maria particularly refers to the various projects taken up by the Natives. The project money was divided among the Native project holders, and reports which suited the Whites were presented. Therefore, Maria says that the money was "Not very much, just enough to divide us . . ." (p. 183). Maria Campbell's narrative amply illustrates what James S. Frideres comments on in some detail:

The federal Government has neglected to consult with Natives concerning their welfare, has failed to develop and finance effective programs to assist Natives, and, at times has prevented Natives from becoming organised in pursuit of their rights. The political organisation of Natives has also been hindered by the factionalism

that has developed within different segments of Native society. All these factors, and others, have led to the marginality of Natives in Canada.¹⁶

However, in spite of many setbacks Maria saw hope in the reorganisation of Native organisations which were founded by Jim Brady and Malcolm Narris in 1920s. Even Eugene founded the Alberta Native Communications Society. The Natives organised and "There was a new feeling of pride and hope everywhere" (p. 183). These developments gave her hope to continue her struggle.

Maria's book ends on a very optimistic note. She shares this optimism with the writings of Lee Maracle as well. Maria feels happy that Cheechum's words, "Because they killed Riel they think they have killed us too, but some day, my girl, it will be different" (p. 11) and "It will come, my girl, someday it will come" (p. 75)—full of hope and optimism, ultimately came true. Besides, Maria also propagates non-violence and unity among all: "I believe that one day, very soon, people will set aside their differences and come together as one. May be not because we love one another, but because we will need each other to survive. Then together we will fight our common enemies. Change will come because this time we won't give up" (p. 184).

Notes :

¹ Maria Campbell, Introduction (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973; Goodread Biographies, 1983), p. 2. All subsequent references to the book are from this edition and have been incorporated in the parentheses in the text itself.

² Satendra Nandan, Preface, *Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story* (ANU: Pacific Indian Publications, 2001), p. 14.

³ Alfred Fisher, Rev. of *Halfbreed*, *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, XII, No. 2, 1992, 323.

⁴ Armando E. Jannetta, 'Métis Autobiography: The Emergence of a Genre amid Alienation, Resistance and Healing in the Context of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973),' *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, No. 12, Fall 1995, 173.

⁵ Pankaj K. Singh, 'Resisting Neo-Colonialism: *The Trial of Dedan, Kimathi* and *'I will Marry When I want,'* *African Quarterly* (Special Issue – *Mightier than Machete*, XXXIV, No. 3, 1994, 121.

⁶ Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 58.

⁷ James S. Frideres, *Native Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts* (Ontario: Prentice Hall Canada, 1988, 3rd edition), p. 205.

⁸ Satendra Nandan, *Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story*, p. 95.

⁹ David Alan Long and Olive Patricia Dickason, *Visions of the Heart: Canadian Aboriginal Issues* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace and Co., Canada, 1996), p. 45.

¹⁰ Christine Welsh, 'Voices of the Grandmothers: Reclaiming a Métis Heritage,' *Canadian Literature (Discourse in Early Canada)* No. 131, Winter, 1991, 23.

¹¹ C. Gopinathan Pillal, "Aesthetic of Resistance: A Reading of Lee Maracle's 'Charlie' and 'Maggie,'" *Indian Journal of Canadian Studies*, VIII, 1999, 156.

¹² Arun Mukherjee, *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1994), p. 77.

¹³ Mira Seth, 'Generating Awareness,' *Yojana: A Development Monthly*, XXXV, August 2001, 9.

¹⁴ Harish Narang, *Politics as Fiction: The Novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1995), p. 12.

¹⁵ Charles Paris, 'Never, Never Forget,' Cassandra Kobayashi and Roy Miki, eds., *Spirit of Redress: Japanese Canadians in Conference* (Vancouver: JC Publications, 1989), p. 21.

¹⁶ James S. Frideres, *Native Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts*, p. 205.

African, Indian, And/Or Canadian? : Locating M.G. Vassanji In Contemporary Diasporic Writing

Somdatta Mondal

"I the guilty one In the middle, the perilous In-between"

The In-Between World of Vikram Lall, p. 279

Examining the themes of exile, identity, longing, displacement, race relations, rootlessness, and ultimately, acceptance is the staple stuff of most novels on the diasporic experience. In order to make sense of his present state, the writer revisits the past by taking recourse to memory and imagination. As Rushdie has noted in his "Imaginary Homelands," the migrant is always conscious of the fact that "it's my present that is foreign, and [...] the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time." As the Indian abroad attempts to reclaim the lost home through the 'double filter' of 'time and migration,' the India that is remembered is no longer the one that was left behind, nor an invented one, but an *imagined* one:

But if we do look back we must also do so in the knowledge [...] that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the things that were lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

This may largely be due, no doubt, to the fact that memory is notoriously unreliable, and frequently discontinuous: "It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost." (10-11) But the shards of the broken glass of nostalgia are not simply a mark of loss; reassembled, they can become, Rushdie believes, a useful tool for the novelist to portray the fractured and liminal exilic condition, the heap of broken images that also sums up contemporary life itself. Besides – and this is something Rushdie does not mention here – the remains of the past are also frequently assembled by the

imagination to form a new, and kaleidoscopic, design, one which, in Homi Bhabha's words, "does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present." (7) It is Stuart Hall who most effectively sums up this point in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora":

Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference [...] It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to the 'lost origins' [...] And yet, this 'return to the beginning' is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence in the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery [...] (235-6)

-Sudesh Mishra defines Indian diasporic writing as belonging to two categories – the 'sugar' and the 'masala' diaspora – the non-voluntary 'girmityas' who were taken as indentured labourers to work in colonial plantations, versus the more voluntary diasporics who left their home country in search of better opportunities elsewhere. But interestingly, writers of both these categories share the angst of living a hyphenated existence, pondering continuously on the question, where is 'home'? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination and in this sense it is a place of no return. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. An Indian by descent, the Kenyan-born, Tanzania-raised, US educated, and a Canadian by citizenship since 1978, M.G. Vassanji is a writer who falls somewhere in between the two categories. Like Neil Bissoondath and Michael Ondaatje, he is an Indian expatriate separated from the subcontinent by generations.

For a nuclear physicist with a doctoral degree from the University of Pennsylvania and who worked at the Chalk River atomic power station, Vassanji's career change came according to his own declaration after studying Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. In an interview with Chelva Kanaganayakam, Vassanji said this of his decision to leave the field of physics:

It is the kind of thing you can keep on doing. I had reached a point when I could just churn out things. Unless you are at MIT or Harvard, or a place like that, you are not really at the forefront. Sometimes I miss that life because of the way of thinking it demands. My writing, however, is much more important. It seems to be the mission in life that I finally achieved (34).

So what did he write about? Right from the beginning of his writing career, Vassanji's work dwells upon the themes of migration of Indians living in East Africa. Some members of this community later undergo a second migration to Europe, Canada, or the United States. As he tells Ray Deonandan, "We come from a dense social background. As youths we are surrounded by people: large families, small communities. There are so many characters we observe that we can't fit them in our heads, so they overflow into stories." In all of his writings, India becomes, to borrow Rushdie's clichéd phrase again, "Indias of the mind." In his first Commonwealth Writer's Prize-winning novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1989), Vassanji tells the story of four generations of Asians in Tanzania and how to preserve and recreate oral histories and mythologies that have long been silenced. "I put a lot of my emotional baggage in it," he admits to an interviewer, Gene Carey. The novel celebrates the spirit of Asian pioneers, Muslims from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. Living under German colonial rule, the family of Dhanji Govindji becomes permanent residents of Africa while witnessing historical events that result in the birth of African nationalism. Creating a family memoir, a coming-of-age story that looks at the past with affection and understanding, Vassanji shows that the hopes and dreams of Indian immigrants were essentially the same as those of Europeans who went to the New World: namely, education for their children and a more prosperous future for the next generation. When asked by interviewer Susheila Nasta as to how he came to write this novel, Vassanji replied:

There are several ways of looking at that. One is that I live in Canada and at some point I felt a tremendous sense of loss of being away from the place I grew up in, and what I did was try to recreate the life that we lived. But I think a more important motive perhaps is that that life has never been lived...I mean never been written about. It's something that is slowly being wiped out and as the people who've experienced that life die

away, die off, then there's no more record of that life. I think all people should have a sense of themselves, a sense of where they come from, and it just happens that people in East Africa – I think Indians as well as Africans and especially in Tanzania – don't have that sense, a historical sense, of where they come from. There is a vague kind of oral history telling them where they come from but it's not something that you read about; it's something that's constantly changing, and if you just compare with what goes on in the West, where everything is recorded, you can see that our lives have not been recorded and that's what I set out to do when I wrote the novel. (70)

Thus in Vassanji's writings, the feelings about India represent the deeply ambivalent emotions of the Indian "intellectual exile" (to borrow Edward Said's idea) about the home they have left behind but who cannot help returning to again and again in memory and imagination in their continuing search for identity, acculturation and belonging. After all, as Freud frequently pointed out, it is what comes before, whether in the life of a civilization or in the life of the mind, that organizes the perception of the present. And India is and has always been a pervasive emotional and psychological presence for "anybody anywhere who has even the most tenuous links" with it, as Amitav Ghosh, another well-known diasporic novelist has discovered for himself: "The mother country simply does not have the cultural means to cut him off."

Uhuru Street, published in 1992, is a collection of loosely linked stories that all take place along the same street in Dar es Salaam and interestingly where many characters from the first novel reappear. "Every writer identifies with a certain experience; it's a very private experience, but becomes universal when compared with other experiences," adds the writer. *Uhuru Street*, formerly known as Kichwele Street, "began in the [African] hinterland...came downtown lined by Indian shops, and ended at the ocean. The city's own long history is evoked in references to the Arab, Indian and European people who came to it: "traveller and merchant, slave trader, missionary and colonizer." It is thus a history of a specific type of African city – one which attracted entrepreneurs, adventurers and exploiters from elsewhere, a situation bound to change when independence came to the region. But although Dar es Salaam changes, its expatriate citizens link it to a larger world and they

themselves remain bound to it in their memories, even if they do not return. The Indian shops and tenements of the city – mostly very modest establishments – form the setting of most of the tales, as these Muslim Indian families (often third-generation settlers) eke out a modest and somewhat precarious living from commerce. Many of the fascinating series of portraits (which is what most of these stories are) are of an urban underclass one could find in most cities across the world, but these descriptions all have a distinct local flavour and they are all filtered through a memory that is at once nostalgic and sharp-eyed. In an interview Vassanji tells us that he wrote the stories “with a view to recreate Dar es Salaam where I grew up, during a specific period. And what I thought of doing was just to basically turn off and turn on lights, in a manner of speaking, one by one so each short story would be a flicker of light and then you would have a whole street emerging or a whole city if you like. A few short stories don’t do that but essentially that’s what I am trying to do as that street and that life will in a few years almost be non-existent.” (Nasta, 78) Also many of the stories acknowledge the inevitable racial tensions and hierarchies of this multiethnic society, within which the Indian families form a specific communal cluster. The long-submerged interaction between India, particularly Western India, and East Africa often surfaces through the tension between the diasporic need for ancestral memories of India and the recognition and acceptance of the ‘mutant’ status of the contemporary Indian-East African. This consciousness of cultural hybridity informs the stories as well as the next novel.

The Book of Secrets (1994) that won him the first Giller Prize that same year, is a novel that explores the way the lives of all the people of East Africa, the ‘local’ Africans, the Indian settlers and European colonials constantly intertwine, making the story of each individual, family or community necessarily include that of the other. In it Vassanji traces the histories of people who possessed the diary of a British administrator, the book of secrets. In 1988, a retired Indian-born schoolteacher named Pius Fernandes receives an old diary found in the backroom of an East African shop. Written in 1913 by a British colonial administrator, the diary captivates Fernandes, who begins to research the coded history he encounters in its terse, laconic entries. What he uncovers is a story of forbidden liaisons and simmering vengeance, family secrets and cultural exiles – a story that leads him on an investigative journey through his own

past and Africa's. The novel becomes a mosaic in which the distance provided by the diasporic vision reconciles colonial history with personal story, family saga (the story of three generations of Pipa's family) with an unsolved detective story (How and why does Mariamu steal Corbin's diary? What is her relationship to Corbin? Who is her son's father, Corbin or Pipa?) and the social history of three East African colonies over most of the twentieth century, a history that joins together past, present and future, India, Africa and the West, in and through the act of narration. When researching on this book, Vassanji discovered how poorly the British had treated his grandparents and the other Indians of East Africa. "But Indians are fence-sitters," he declares without judgment. "From this imperialist history, we've become the middle-men everywhere we go. Sometimes this is a reason for scorn, but provides a good vantage for observation" (Deonandan). The colonial history of Kenya and Tanzania serves as the backdrop of the book but it is the personal history contained in the diary of a colonial administrator that fuels the story. While the narrator, a retired schoolteacher, reads the diary and attempts to trace the events that occur after the diary stops, he eventually finds himself revisiting his own personal history. Even though none of the characters ever return to India, the country's presence looms throughout the novel. Talking of his career and of his roots Vassanji -tells Gene Carey:

Once you come here, cross the oceans, there's no going back. There's a psychological belonging to East Africa, particularly Tanzania. You need something to hold on.....I went back to Tanzania in 1989 after 19 years. It is part of my soul. The other part is India, which I visited for the first time in 1993. My father had never been to India, the land of my forefathers. After that, I have visited India a couple of more times.

The Book of Secrets makes frequent reference to the world's separated pockets of Indian culture – New York, East Africa, Toronto and Dubai. The interest in the novel centers not on the liminality of the Indian settler, on his anxieties of ethnicity, but rather on his continuous crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries; the Indians who have made Kenya and Tanzania their home, whether Hindu or Muslim, may be deeply rooted in their individual cultural traditions, which originated in India, but they themselves do not look back at India. Africa is where they belong, and they refuse to believe that they might ever be asked to go back there or to choose between

Indian and Africa. In this novel Indians only come to Africa; they do not go back unless they are forced to, like Fernandes's colleague and fellow Goan, Desouza, who, having ignored the offer of Tanzanian citizenship, finds he cannot return there after he goes to India to recuperate following an accident. If they do leave they emigrate to Europe or America, not to India. Fernandes's decision to leave Goa/India was clearly due to reasons or motives he does not acknowledge to himself even after all these years, preferring, rather to ascribe it to the stereotypical choice of the hybrid comprador; it is thus a part of his careful erasure of his past. It would seem, then, that his hazy images of India, his patchy memories of his life there, his easy acculturation in Tanzania, are at least partly a product of the diasporic 'guilt' Rushdie talks about in "Imaginary Homelands" – "I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women"(25) – which he tries to suppress, or cover up for, by imagining an India from which he had no option but to move away from. In Fernandes, then, is suggested the conflicts between the two kinds of diasporic identity Stuart Hall puts forward, identity as being, which offers a fictive sense of unity and commonality, which the old Goan tries to believe in, and identity as becoming, which reveals, instead, the discontinuity in the migrant identity formation. Hall was of course referring to the Caribbean, but his observations hold true of Africa as well.

Though not a conscious thing, the theme of displacement remains all pervasive in this novel. The way India is imagined here is at least partly due to the double-distancing of Vassanji's personal circumstances, his East African Canadian diasporic identity (which accounts for his lack of first-hand knowledge and experience of what it means to be a Goan or an Indian) as well as to his purposes in this novel, which underscores the ambiguity of the colonial experience and the syncretic and hybrid nature of East African identity at a time when the 'local' Africans were rejecting the Indian immigrant contribution. In another interview given to Shane Rhodes, Vassanji speaks of his personal history of movings, the radical diversity in his life that has resulted from them, and how they affect his writing. He also notes his visits to India and the fact that the country demands a response from him as a writer. For example, in the novel, Vassanji focuses on the interaction between the Shamsi (Indian) community and the native Africans, as well as the colonial administration. It is

interesting to note here the significance of Vassanji's own position as a minority, even within the Islamic tradition of India. As a Muslim, but belonging to a syncretic sect of Islam peculiar to India, the Shamshis (followers of the Aga Khan, who are more often called Khojas, Ismailis and by other names in South Asia), whose rituals traditions and modes of worship exemplify the multicultural world of India as much as they symbolize the border-crossings of its emigrants, the way in which he imagine and re-creates the homeland is different from others, He is both an insider and an outsider at the same time. As Urbashi Barat states, the diary in this novel is "a version of Bhabha's *English Book*, and investigating it becomes a part of the Indian diasporic response to the realities of their dislocation in East Africa and their attempt to negotiate new forms of being in these 'contact zones' "where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other" (Mary Louise Pratt's phrase in *Imperial Eyes*)."

No New Land (1991) is set in Toronto, and portrays a group of Indians from Tanzania trying to adapt to life in a new land. Nuruddin Lalani and his family go to the Toronto suburb of Don Mills only to find that the old world and its values pursue them. A genial orderly at a downtown hospital, he has been accused of sexually assaulting a girl. Although he is innocent, tradition propriety prompts him to question the purity of his own thoughts. Ultimately, his friendship with the enlightened Sushila offers him an alluring freedom from a past that haunts him, a marriage that has become routine, and from the trials of coping with teenage children. Introducing us to a cast of vividly drawn characters within this immigrant community, Vassanji is a keen observer of lives caught between one world and another. Humorous and tragic all at once, the novel illustrates how the past always haunts the present and the future. In the interview given to Susheila Nasta, Vassanji tells us how he wrote the novel "purely for fun" and his main aim was to see how the Asians who left Dar es Salaam for Toronto "coped with their life there" and "how they redefined themselves In Toronto." He explains:

There are several ways of doing that. There are three men – and they do it in different ways. There is an older person, a middle-aged man who is the main character, and going to

Toronto is essentially a liberation. At least after a while he sees it is giving him lots of possibilities but the question that the novel asks is whether he is capable of taking them on. The answer is it's not possible because he is essentially where he came from and that puts certain restraints or constraints on him and he cannot do everything that he would have liked to do; he cannot break free from the past. And there are two other younger characters who more or less have escaped the past because they're younger and they have been educated in the West or in the Western style (78-9).

The theme is re-examined again in *Amrika* (1999), which may be viewed as a classic immigrant story that focuses upon the story of Ramji, a young student who comes in America from Dar es Salaam, (the African city that was Vassanji's home till 1970) and his subsequent life in North America. The variation of the spelling of America in the title of course refers to the way many Indians pronounce the name. Though the world of the 1960s in America forms the backdrop – a world of the anti-Vietnam movement, “changing values and sexual freedom, of peace marches, religious cults, and protest bombings” and is a country that is far different from the one he dreamed about, Vassanji has also inevitably woven his tale around the issues of exile, longing, displacement, and ultimately, acceptance. Swept up in events whose consequences will haunt him for years to come, Ramji ultimately finds himself drawn into a set of circumstances that hold terrifying reminders of the past and its unanswered questions. By relating the plight of the protagonist to that of his own, Vassanji tells Gene Cary:

In the case of Ramji, it is an extreme situation. He breaks away. He goes to an ashram to isolate himself. To me, it is a personal statement. Ramji learns about radicalism in America. He has guilt feelings about not returning back to channel his knowledge into politics but the idea remains at the back of his mind. If learning about radicalism is the first irony in the book, the second one is realization that in America he is still considered a colored person, a Third-world person.

In November 2003, Vassanji won a second Giller Prize for his novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* which is the culminating story of his experiences as a diasporic writer inhabiting many spaces but belonging to none. The title itself injects some unease in the

reader about a category of people who don't belong to either of the traditionally opposed and fixed categories against which each defines itself and the other. Set in East Africa it deals with the ambiguous situation of South Asians in East Africa who are neither indigenous Africans nor European colonizers. Many of them cannot find a familiar refuge on the Indian subcontinent nor in the colonial 'home country.' They are alienated from their African homelands regardless of their emotional attachments and legal status. Possessing a "double vision" which comes only when one is alienated from the dominant group, the protagonist of this novel tells us about his own evolution in a world of bribery and corruption that spans forty-seven years of history in Kenya. In their citation for awarding the Giller Prize for Vassanji's latest book of fiction, the jurists called *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* "an astonishing tapestry of irresistible vignettes, brilliantly exploring the painful lessons of history – national, cultural and personal – amidst the fragility of human relationships." In spite of claiming it to be a work of fiction, like his earlier works, this novel is a thinly veiled autobiographical work. It instantly reminds one of Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Paradise* (1994) where Gurnah also depicted a pre-colonial urban East Africa in his novel – a fascinating world in which Muslim black Africans, Christian missionaries and Indians from the subcontinent co-exist in a fragile, subtle social hierarchy. The story is dominated by issues of identity and displacement and Gurnah, like Vassanji, addresses these from personalized, human histories. Like the indentured labourers who went to Mauritius, the Caribbean islands, Fiji, and other places to work in colonial sugar plantations, Vassanji's story tells us about three generations of Hindu Punjabi migrants who went to East Africa to work as labourers to lay tracks for the British colonial East African Railways. It also gives a vivid picture of the Shamsis, the Kutchis and the Gujarati businessmen who flourished in this region but were eventually uprooted and displaced at the end of the colonial rule, and especially after the Mau Mau uprisings and the presidency of the "Old Man," Jomo Kenyatta. The characters in this deeply textured novel carry their histories with them wherever they go. Through them, Vassanji offers a moving account of Kenyan history, a history that both stirs emotions because pains of the past and unrewarded present still hurt, a history that also shifts depending on which racial angle one looks at things, a history that refuses to be left behind and migrates with one wherever one goes. Vassanji depicts the

Asians as normal citizens with the capacity, like Kenyans of other backgrounds, to build or destroy the nation. To recuperate the interiority of repressed categories of people across the racial divide, his narrative textualizes a familiar history and real subjectivities.

Growing up in Nakuru, Kenya, in the 1950s, nine-year old Vikram Lall and his sister Deepa, the children of Indian merchants, become friends with two British children, and with Njoroge, a Kikuyu, who lives with his grandfather, the gardener of the Lalls and other local families. While Vic is secretly in love with the British girl Annie, Njoroge is secretly in love with Deepa, both childhood relationships ignoring the cultural and colour barrier of that era. It was a time when avoiding the pull of the 'homeland,' most Indian paid their allegiance to the British crown and longed to settle in England. This is also the time when the Mau Mau, a Kikuyu group dedicated to rid their own country of the British rulers, started up underground terrorism and violence.

Alternating points of view between the present, when Vikram Lall is in his fifties and lives outside Toronto with the distinction of being numbered "one of Africa's most corrupt men, a cheat of monstrous and reptilian cunning," and the early 1950s, in which as a child he lived in a diverse Kenyan community, Vassanji gradually establishes the conditions which make life in Kenya for a non-African a difficult and sometimes difficult activity. It shows us how, in spite of their wealth, the Asians were always considered Shylocks, never to be trusted. Yet the protagonist is aware that they "all carry the past" inside them in some way and "can't help it." Vividly describing Vic's ties with the Indian community, both in Kenya and with the family "back home," he shows how the Lalls are doubly alienated, first from their family in India, whose village near Peshawar, thanks to the British Partition of India, is now part of Pakistan, and from the majority population in Kenya. "My fantasy has partly to do with a desperate need to belong to the land I was born in – but it's not possible either," (61) adds the main character. When violence strikes closer home, Vic moves with his family to Nairobi and the disintegration of his family and personal life begins. Getting a job in the Ministry of Transport, Vic soon moves up the political ladder, working for ministries and powerful individuals, but is made the proverbial scapegoat when money-laundering charges are thrust upon him. Slowly Vic is depicted as a man who has reached a point

of no return when political whims decide his personal agenda. He is an Indian without a constituency, whom the rulers could hold up and display to the World Bank and other donors as the "crafty alien corruptor" of their country. While we sympathize with Vikram and his plight in the inevitable but unaccepted between-ness of situations, we cannot agree with some of the positions he takes while in exile. His thoughts contradict the influential statement by Chelva Kanaganayakam that "to be an expatriate or an exile is not to inhabit in void – it is rather to be granted a special insight, a vision not available to the insider."

In the novel, characters occupy "in-between" positions. Indians intermarry with Africans to create an interstitial hybrid race; Vikram takes the Mau Mau oath, and Deepa, an Asian child, protects her African playmate Njoroge by hiding him under her bed. Deepa also puts Joseph, Njoroge's grandson, under the care of Vikram when the African child goes to Canada. Thus the novel bemoans the alienation and incompleteness that attends the inevitable but yet to be accepted "in-between-ness" of the postcolonial and transnational subject. The pleasure of any text (with apologies to Barthes) lies in the way it positions itself between the reader and the author, mediating between the two institutions in a way that gives us agency to participate in the construction of the text's possible meanings. According to Evan Mwangi, this novel "serves as a middle man in the transactions between the reader and the author. It is bound to be read in different ways, depending on the reader's ideological positions. Like its cunning narrator, the text is a politely sly narrative that needs to unmask the civility with which it expresses its bitterness about the post-colony."

Like V.S. Naipaul in most of his writings, there are bits and pieces of Vassanji's own story in this novel. Like his fictional hero Vikram Lall, Vassanji is the proverbial outsider. Left dangling without seeing any way out of his predicament, Vikram's as well as his creator's condition remind us of Trishanku, the character from *The Ramayana* who went 'embodied' to heaven but had to settle at an intermediate third space, midway between the earth and paradise. This condition, earlier described by fellow Indian-Canadian writer Uma Parameswaran, serves as a metaphor for the modern expatriate/immigrant. In his obsession with going to heaven in his own body, Trishanku represents the consequences of narcissism; his story includes an encounter between the divine and the human,

but above all highlights the body and the spirit. Even in Canada, the chosen hiding place for a self-exile, Vikram Lall still craves for his African and Indian roots, though he knows quite well that he will belong to none and has to be satisfied with his "in-betweenness." In the epilogue to the novel, Vassanji quotes from three different sources, all emphasizing this rootless condition. The first is from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, "Who is the third who walks always beside you?". The second is from *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: "Neti, neti." (Not this, not that). The third is a Swahili riddle "Po pote niendapo anifuata" (Wherever I go he follows me) the answer to which is a shadow. It would not therefore be too far-fetched to state that the 'Hell – Midway – Heaven' diasporic formula can be equated with Vassanji's and his protagonist Vikram Lall's relationship with Africa – Canada – India, in that order.

When asked by Suchitra Behal about how different this book was from his earlier works, Vassanji categorically stated:

This book is the closest to me after my first novel, *Gunny Sack*, which was based in a way on my childhood experiences. But this book felt as close when in fact superficially it is the farthest from my own background. It's about a Punjabi family and I am not a Punjabi.....It felt very close and it's a mystery to me why I felt so much in touch with the character. I felt till the last days (laughs) this is a genuine character. Also it's a book that I felt was most complete after I finished writing it. I won't say honest, but I didn't have any inhibitions about it.

This random survey of the six books that he has written till date shows that Vassanji is primarily concerned with how migrations and multiple-migrations affect the lives and identities of his characters, an issue that is personal to him as well: "[the Indian diaspora] is very important ...once I went to the US, suddenly the Indian connection became very important: the sense of origins, trying to understand the roots of India that we had inside us." (Kanaganayyakam 21). This relationship with 'home,' very often a constructed imaginary space, is something that most diasporic writers try to address in their works.

Before concluding I must mention the 'Trishanku'-like dangling state of Vassanji, as someone residing in an in-between state in comparison with another Canadian writer of Indian origin, Himani Banerjee. In her introduction to a 1995 volume of essays Himani states:

I have spent half of my life in Toronto, coming no nearer and going no further than I did in the first few years. This journey of mine in Canada is like an arc, suspended, which has not found a ground yet...Other than the language English, which I knew and taught, everything else was not only 'other' and alien, but full of denial, rejection and sometimes...downright hatred.

Showing her readers that they can work to change both society and themselves, Himani does not mince her words when she tells us that even Vassanji, the publisher of *The Toronto South Asian Review* (TSAR, that he and his wife Nurjehan Aziz founded in 1989 and later published under the name of *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*) who helped many diasporic writing see the light of day, had made fun of her as a writer in a novel like *No New Land*. She accused Vassanji and other so-called established and popular South Asian writers in Canada of avoiding direct socio-political issues and treading on safe ground by either romanticizing the mother country that they have left behind or creating what Naipaul calls "physical India" versus the "India of the mind." She repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that none of the works that have won acclaim actually challenge the Canadian establishment. It was she and other social activists who helped people like Vassanji be what they are today. Whether we agree with Himani Banerjee or not, it is clear that like many other doubly-alienated diasporic writers, Moyer Vassanji will remain like the mythical Trishanku hovering in virtual space for ever. Academics like us will therefore feel free to call him either an expatriate writer of Indian origin, an African writer, an Asian writer, a Canadian writer, or a postcolonial writer.

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Triple Ambivalence: Australa, Canada, and South Asia in the Diasporic Imagination

Makarand Paranjape

Introduction

For an interview with Anita Rau Badami's, the May 13th *Globe and Mail* supplement, Toronto, supplied the following headline: "One foot in India and a couple of toes in Canada." Speaking of her experience as a Canadian writer of Indian origin in the context of the launch of her just released novel, *The Hero's Walk*, Badami observed, "I was 29 years in India and 10 years here, so I have one foot in India and a couple of toes here." Badami's own resolution of the crisis of being diasporic is eloquently expressed in her affirmation of the blessings of double vision: "We are both doomed and blessed, to be suspended between two worlds, always looking back, but with two gorgeous places to inhabit, in our imaginations or our hearts." In my opinion, however, such affirmations serve to camouflage the central impulse of many of the novels of the South Asian Diaspora. That is why, inverting her statement, I am tempted to characterize the experience of writers like her as, "One foot in Canada and a couple of toes in India." Indeed, I shall argue that the main thrust of South Asian diasporic writers is usually away from India and towards Canada, Australia, or whatever their destinations are. In other words, it is an out of India or away from India experience that is being recorded. However, diasporic texts themselves function in a sort of camouflage mode, which creates a series of ambivalences or uncertainties. This, then, is my central argument in a paper which, to use Peter van de Veer's phrase, is about the dialectics of longing and belonging, about the way in which diasporic fictions relate to their homelands.

My paper, which tries to compare texts and attitudes in three continents—North America, South Asia, and Canada, does so by using the writings of the diaspora as a bridge. This is a sort of triangular comparison, which results as much in creative and critical ambivalences in clear or categorical insights. One reason for this is the heterogeneous nature of the texts involved. My method is to approach the literary material through some carefully chosen

theoretical interlocutors so as to clarify the broader issues involved as well as to attempt productive generalizations before attempting actual analysis of specific texts. For the Australian section I attempt to problematize both Australian attitudes to (South) Asia and South Asian attitudes to Australia using the game of cricket as a metaphor for my comparison. Then I concentrate mostly on two novels, Mena Abdulla's *The Time of the Peacock* (1965) and Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled* (2000). These two women's South Asian texts from two different phases also represent two contrasting attitudes to the homeland and the adopted country. What makes them similar is that neither is an example of simple affirmation or negation—in either direction. In the Canadian section, I first attempt a typology or chronological categorization of South Asian Canadian writing using diasporan writer and critics like Uma Parmeswaran and Victor Ramraj, before focussing on two groups of writers, the twice diasporic Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African Canadian on the one hand, and the post-1960 direct immigrants from India on the other. M. G. Vassanji and Rohinton Mistry serve as examples of each type.

I'm especially interested in the relationship between diasporas and homelands because I believe that this will help us understand not only how diasporas regard themselves, but in how homelands come to be created and defined. What the growing body of research on this area suggests is a complex and reciprocal relationship between the two, rather than a simplistic unilinear trajectory of influence or impact. As van der Veer puts it: "The theme of belonging opposes rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left" (4). In other words, a nation needs a diaspora to reaffirm its own sense of rootedness, while the migrant who did not feel like an Indian in India may suddenly discover his Indianness as a diasporan. Or, in van der Veer's words, "Those who do not think of themselves as Indians before migration become Indians in the diaspora" (7).

Diasporas and homelands are therefore best seen as structurally interdependent, though in the case of South Asia this may not seem immediately obvious. One reason for this is that the region that is today known as South Asia consists of several independent nation states, most of whom arguably share a cultural commonality and continuity stretching to four or more thousand

years. There is thus confusion and overlapping of the categories of nation, culture, ethnicity, religion, race, language, and even caste, when it comes to defining the identity of the diasporan. Any one or more of these categories in conjunction or even contradiction defines what can be called the South Asian diaspora. This is one reason that I have retained the somewhat ambiguous idea of the homeland in my paper. A homeland can be a nation, a region, a linguistic area located in South Asia or a language, ethnic, or religious group originally from South Asia or a combination of both. When considering the South Asian diaspora, the challenge, in van der Veer's words, is neither to "unify and homogenize" all the diasporic cultures into "Indian culture overseas" nor to "deconstruct the South Asian diaspora to the point of dissolution" (8).

The reason why homelands and diasporas are structurally interdependent is that just as homelands give rise to diasporas, diasporas also have the capacity to shape, if not create homelands. So, while it is obvious that forced or free migration out of the subcontinent gave rise to what we can today identify as diasporan communities across the world, these communities, or at least some of their members, contributed immensely to the creation of the modern nation states of the region. To be more specific, the idea of India as an independent, modern nation was formed not just within its geographical borders but in the greater India of the diaspora. Let us not forget that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi became a Mahatma not in India, but among the indentured labourers whose rights and dignity he fought for in distant South Africa. It was his fight against racism, imperialism, and apartheid that made him take on the most powerful empire in history—and, so to say—win. Similarly, Mohammad Ali Jinnah had withdrawn to England but was called back to assume the leadership of the Muslim League in its struggle that led to a separate Muslim homeland of Pakistan. More recently, both Sikh and Tamil separatism in Punjab and Sri Lanka respectively have been supported, if not controlled by diasporic communities. But the best example of the diaspora creating the homeland is that of Israel; in this case, a modern nation was invented and willed into existence by a community of diasporic people, concentrated mostly in Europe.

If we were to apply this idea to what Rushdie calls "imaginary homelands," those fictional territories that are created in literature, I think that the structural interdependence that I spoke of earlier still

holds. The canonical texts of native literatures are often authored far away by exiled or diasporic writers refashioning a home not so much away from home as from abroad. The long and distinguished line of expatriates who shaped twentieth century American literature is an example. If we consider Indian English literature today, it would be no exaggeration to say that most of its best known writers live abroad: Naipaul, Rushdie, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, G.V.Desani, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry—the list seems to be endless. In fact, a leading Canadian Punjabi poet, Ajmer Rode, is now a part of the syllabus of modern Punjabi poetry in India.

We could sum up this ambivalent, complex and dialectical relationship between diasporas and homelands in the words of Victor Ramraj: "Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to the centrifugal homeland. But this attachment is countered by a yearning for a sense of belonging to the current place of abode" (216). This makes diasporic narratives both transitional and liminal. The texts themselves are journeys between source cultures and target cultures, between homelands and diasporas, until the two overlap, change places, or merge. While I am interested in this broader issue of the relationship between diasporas and homelands, my focus in this paper is on South Asian Australian and South Asian Canadian literature. What I propose to do is not to offer extensive and elaborate readings of texts, but concentrate instead on the possible models or coordinates that will help us map these literatures.

Part I: South Asian Australia

To a person of colour from South Asia, Australia presents itself as a vast, sparsely populated continent, with a culture that is at once familiar and unfamiliar. It is familiar because of the shared and enduring connection with the British Empire. While Australians, like South Asians, resisted the empire in many ways, unlike the South Asians, they also supported and extended it. The cultural institutions are similar—for instance, the traffic keeps to the left—and knowledge of British literature, history, and culture are as widespread as in educated South Asia. And yet, South Asians are definitely viewed as outsiders or "Others" of what is the dominant or culture-defining group, the white Anglo-Australian majority. On the one hand, this group would like to present Australia as a country that is liberal,

egalitarian, hospitable, practically crime free, progressive, multicultural, contemporary and yet relaxed, informal, sporting, pleasant, fair, and decent—which indeed, it is. But beneath these signs of welcome, there is also a distinct sense that the South Asian is an alien, a foreigner, not really a barbarian, but certainly not quite up to par. We are at once put into our place, as it were, reminded that we can almost never be “real” Australians.

What is produced, consequently, is a certain complexity of attitudes that is at the heart of my paper. This complexity, on the one hand, concerns Australian attitudes to Asia, of which the South Asian diaspora is a part. On the other hand, South Asian, especially diasporan representations of Australia and of their experience here, also show an ambivalence. This is why this section of the paper about the Australia-Asia relationship has two parts. In the first, I wish to explore Australian attitudes to Asia and in the second Asian, especially diasporan accounts of Australia. This gives Part I of my paper a certain kind of symmetry: what we see, in fact, is a double ambivalence and it is this doubling—mirrored, mirroring—that I wish to highlight in the first part of the paper.

I.1

Perhaps, the best way to start this section is with a cricketing story. As we know, cricket has now become one of the most interesting and studied sites of the colonial and postcolonial encounter (Nandy 1989, Appadurai); and it is certainly one of the strongest links that Australia and South Asia share. And that's why I resort to it as my opening move. But it also serves to underline the sometimes hidden link between Australia and South Asia, I mean the colonial link, that is still cherished by many Australians. Behind the Asia-Australia relationship, hence, is the presence of another country, Britain. Indeed, it might be argued that what Britain did to Australia holds, in some sense, a key to what Australians, in turn, did to the Asians. This is point of the cricketing story.

The story concerns the famous “bodyline” series of 1932-1933 when the touring English team, lead by Douglas Jardine, captured the ashes 4-1 against Australia on Australian soil. When the English team set out, no one would give them half a chance of winning. The reason was, among other things, the demolition man

on the Australian squad, the incredible batting machine, Don Bradman, who was known to treat English bowling with contempt. However, few had reckoned with Jardine's obsession to win or the extents that he would go. Jardine equipped his team with five fast bowlers, instructing them to bowl at the body of the Australian batsmen. Even when the batsmen stood exposing the wickets, the bowlers aimed at them, usually at the head or chest. This is what came to be termed bodyline cricket. Though England won, the relations between the two countries were severely threatened and strained. Telegrams were sent back and forth threatening dire consequences. Jardine was accused of unsportsmanly behaviour and later stepped down as captain of the English team. Bodyline bowling, too, was banned. All this is so well known that there are books written on it (see, for instance, *Cricket and Empire: The 1932-33 Bodyline Tour of Australia* by Ric Sissons and Brian Stoddart.)

What concerns me is the interpretation that Ashis Nandy gives to the happenings in this series. Nandy suggests that Jardine's approach was typical of the British attitude to Australia. It not only reflected his class superiority and desire to teach the Aussies a lesson, to remind them of their place, so to speak, but also imperial arrogance towards a colony. Ironically, Jardine's main weapon against the Australians was Harold Larwood. Larwood was a working class person, who had actually been a miner. Cricket for him had been an avenue for social and economic advancement. That he was bowling to other "blokes" like himself only underlined how much the Australians had internalised the contempt of the British for them. Larwood's own career only serves to emphasise his own tragedy and isolation. He chose to settle down in Australia though he had been hated so fiercely there.

Jardine, too, was an interesting figure. Disliked by his opponents and abhorred by Australians, he was nevertheless a daringly innovative captain, who inspired fierce loyalty in his teammates. He was also a good defensive batsman, especially against pace bowling. In the following season, when the West Indian pace bowlers adopted the same strategy against him, he made a courageous 137, though battered and bruised. Nicknamed the "Iron Duke," aristocratic in his manners, and often aloof to the point of being arrogant, Jardine was known to be a thorough gentleman. Ironically, Jardine himself had a colonial past. Though integrated

so completely into the English ruling classes, he was of Scottish descent and had actually been born in Malabar Hill, Bombay. When he led the MCC against India later in 1933-1934, he never used bodyline bowling against Indian batsmen. In fact, he annoyed the British authorities by mixing freely with Indians. He retired from first class cricket after the third test in Madras. It is curious that Jardine treated Australians with contempt but was sympathetic to the Indians.

In "The need to have inferiors and enemies," his Preface to a new edition of *Australia's Ambivalence Towards Asia: Politics, Neo/Post-colonialism, and Fact/Fiction* by J. V. D'Cruz and William Steele (2001), Ashis Nandy cites the bodyline series to brace his argument that Australian attitudes to the Aborigines and Asians stem from their own inferiority vis a vis the British. To put it simply: the British treated them badly, so they needed to have their own inferiors in order to feel a bit like the British:

White Australia had to learn to despise the browns and the yellows of Asia and Australia because it itself was despised and the contempt had been internalised. ... Official Australia *has* to try to share the white man's civilising mission because that is very nearly its only means of gatecrashing into the Anglo-Saxon world as an equal partner (11)

Hence, Australia's participation in every major war on the side of the dominant power—the two World Wars, South Korea, Vietnam, and even the Gulf War.

The fissures and contradictions in Australian self-perception arising from its ambivalent relationship with the colonialist centre are thus magnified and refracted in the manner in which it treats its "Others." As Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra show so clearly in *Dark Side of the Dream*, Australian claims to greatness and nationhood, ostensibly founded on their break with colonialist Britain, are, at best facile, if not downright suspect:

On the contrary we see the culture and its literature as still determined massively by its complicity with an imperialist enterprise, coexisting in a necessary but compromised symbiosis with moments and forces of subversion and resistance from within the society. (x)

What is required, in other words, is to distinguish between a complicit and a resistant postcolonialism, a difference that seems to

be elided in works such as *The Empire Writes Back*. Settler colonies, like Australia, not only share a complex relationship with their imperial progenitors, but also structural features. Each colony, as a fragment in a metropolitan complex, is a part of a larger colonial system, though at times at odds against it. So even as Australia resists Britain, defining its cultural and political independence from it and thus asserting its national identity, it also serves, in its own way, not only as an agent of colonialism but as a minor colonising power in its own right. The latter aspect of Australia becomes especially obvious in its treatment of Aboriginals, and as I have been saying, Asians. The methods of "Othering" follow classic imperialistic patterns. Hodge and Mishra assert that Australia's own imperialism remains unacknowledged because it cannot be legitimately accommodated to the national myth (xiii). The result, therefore, is a sort of "fissure" or "contradiction," if not schizophrenia, in the Australian psyche: the official notion of the self as shaped by egalitarian and working class ideology versus the Imperial compulsions and collusions, both at home and abroad. Australia, as a postcolonial notion, demands both autonomy and dependence, both resistance to imperialism and reconciliation with it. Older dispossession of the Aboriginals are thus replaced or substituted by new marginalisation of minorities and immigrants while the claims of Australian fair play and democracy are simultaneously advanced.

The insights of political psychologists like Nandy and social critics like Hodge and Mishra are supported the considerable volume of literature on Australia's perceptions of Asia. It is these perceptions, which may be considered as forming the pre-history of the broader issue of Australia-Asia relations that are still useful in understanding the mutual ambivalence between the two. Among the best of these studies is David Walker's *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850-1939* (1999). Walker goes through great lengths to show the enormous fear and paranoia that characterised early Australian attitudes to Asia. This fear and paranoia is found in the whole genre of "invasion narratives," notable among which is William Lane's *White or Yellow: A Story of the Race War of AD 1908*. In this book China is the enemy whereas in *The Coloured Conquest* (1903) by Rata (R.T. Roydhouse) it is Japan that is demonised (also see Lepervanche, and Waddell et. al in Works Cited).

That is why, it is all the more instructive, if not ironic that, a few years ago, Stephen FritzGerald asked *Is Australia an Asian Country?*

in his eponymous publication. Though the question was rhetorical, it did raise important issues concerning not just the identity and self-perception of, but also the nature of the Asian Influence on, Australia. The simple answer to the question, at least for the present, is: no. But the more complex answer has to do not only with Australia's proximity to Asia, but with the inevitable impact of the larger continent's culture and economy with Australia. FritzGerald argues that in the world to come Asia, especially China, will have a dominant role to play in the region. Hence, Australia needs to be more "Asia-literate," to position itself better to take advantage of the changes that are inevitable, instead of relying merely on its colonial past and proximity with the Western powers. FritzGerald's book was welcomed by some, but met with a deep hostility by others. That the paranoia and fear over an Asian invasion still remain is evident from literature emanating from the ultra-right and other nationalist organisations. In "The Asianisation of Australia: An Exposé of the Asian Future Being Forced upon Australia," posted on the web, the unnamed authors cite experts to prove that that their fear is not unfounded:

What does the future hold for our nation? Australia's most respected demographic expert, Charles Price, has already published his projections: "the year 2020 would see some 2.7 million persons of unmixed Asian origin and about 3.9 million persons of part Asian ancestry; a Total Descent figure of 6.6 million persons of whole or part Asian origin; that is, 26.7% of the total Australian population". So, it is expected that in just over 20 years, over a quarter of Australia's population will be of Asian origin!!! [<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~natinfo/asia2.htm>]

The article goes on to argue how this policy of favouring the Asianisation of Australia is not only misguided but also fraudulent. Luckily, such views constitute a small fringe of Australian society; this particular Website, too, only recorded 7401 hits since 26th October 2000 (up to 10th September 2001). FritzGerald's book, therefore, raises a question that cannot be answered easily. Is Australia an Asian country? At present, probably not, but in the future, more and more likely—this situation, of course, is only met by contradictory responses in Australia, but further emphasises Australia's ambivalence towards Asia. Not the least of the problems is what constitutes "Asia" in the Australian imaginary. In all likelihood,

as the material that I've cited shows, "South Asia" does not have a well-defined place in the Australian mentality; by "Asia" is invariably meant Southeast Asia and China. This confusion of what Asia means only adds to the ambivalence that I've been describing.

Of course, it is far from my purpose to suggest that these fissures or contradictions are peculiar to Australia, though they may indeed have a special Australian manifestation. The fact is that all nation states are built upon such contradictions and schizoid tendencies. Indeed, the modern project itself, of which the nation is just part, is itself ridden with such paradoxes and fault lines. What is more, the diasporan or the immigrant may not be entirely innocent of such ambivalences himself. He may also simultaneously claim equality under the general dispensation of democracy while also, invoking the contrary principle, seek and secure special privileges by capitalising on his difference. If Hodge and Mishra characterise the typical Australian as a figure who "masks an unlimited ambiguity under his excessive simplicities" (xvi), I would argue that the diasporan immigrant also hides a complex ambiguity of privilege and victimhood under the mask of straightforward oppression or deprivation.

1.2

The literary output of South Asian Australians is neither vast nor especially impressive, at least for now; the secondary material on it is equally scanty too. The best known writers can be counted on the fingers of two hands—an illustrative list (in alphabetical order) would include Mena Abdullah, Chitra Fernando, Yasmine Gooneratne, Adib Khan, Chandani Lokuge, Ernest MacIntyre, Christine Mangala, and Satendra Pratap Nandan. Perhaps a few others might also be added, but the list is still small. My purpose here is not to offer a detailed analysis of these authors or texts but to assess this body of work so as to detect its shape, direction, and quality. I am especially interested in understanding South Asian attitudes to Australia as are evident in these writings. One of the most curious components of this diaspora, which I shall not engage with, is the large Anglo-Indian community. It is still uncertain if a distinct body of writing by this community may be identified. More likely, both the community and its writers might display a willingness to integrate themselves into the dominant, White Australian majority

(Moore). It is my conjecture that there is little effort on their part to retain a distinct South Asian identity in larger Australian social mix. There is also some literature in languages other than English, such as Sinhala or Tamil, but I shall not be looking at that either. My method here is try to single out one text each from two distinct phases of this writing to identify patterns of diasporic consciousness in this literature, especially as they pertain to perceptions of Australia. My choice of these two texts is not entirely arbitrary. Both are texts by women and therefore offer a sense of double dispersal; both are also stories of growing up, though in different ways. But, more importantly, both represent the complexities of the diasporic experience, its refusal to yield to simple formulas of explanation or understanding.

But before actually discussing these texts, it might be interesting, if not instructive, to propose a periodisation. In the first instance, Indians first impinged themselves on the Australian psyche during the Great Revolt of 1857-58, when gory reports of heathens slaughtering Englishmen, raping their wives, and murdering their children, were printed daily in all Australian newspapers (see D'Cruz 1973:11-31). Later, South Asians arrived in person. There are various accounts of the first South Asians in Australia. According to one version, there were Indian camel drivers in Australia from 1860, though they were all called "Afghans." There were also Indian, mostly Punjabi, farmers in Queensland and New South Wales in since the first decades of the 20th century. According to one theory these Punjabis came to Australia about the same time that they went to Canada, that is around 1907. Apparently, the regiment that was destined for Canada, actually went via Australia. When they returned to India, they brought back stories of unlimited stretches of land waiting to be farmed and settled in two continents. Several of these early immigrants, who came to be known as Afghans, were actually Indians. Also, the large stock of wild camels in Australia has in fact descended from Indian camels brought by these early farmers and traders. Even the number of these latter first South Asian immigrants is very uncertain. In the early decades of the 20th century, it is estimated to be anywhere from 100 to 7000 (Walker 36; also see Awasthi and Chandra). This early period, which may be considered to last right up the 1960s, may better be characterised by orature rather than literature.

The next phase may be said to begin in the late 1950s or early 1960s and last well into the 1980s, before the recent burst of South Asian creativity in Australia. This is what I would call the "quiet" phase, to borrow a phrase from Paul Sharrad's excellent essay on Mena Abdullah (252). The contemporary phase, however, will give rise to a subsequent one in which really significant writing is likely to emerge. It is tempting to suggest a major shift or progression from the quiet to the contemporary phase. For instance, we could make a plausible case for considering the quiet phase to be basically assimilationist whereas the contemporary phase begins to show signs of a more openly critical engagement with Australia. I intend to show that any such simplification runs the risk of ending up as a falsification.

The most obvious candidate for a representative text of the quiet phase is Mena Abdullah's *The Time of the Peacock* (1965). Abdullah's stories started appearing in periodicals as early as 1953. They were first collected in book form in 1965, before the Aborigines got their vote or before multiculturalism became an official policy in Australia. The manner in which the book was reviewed shows that it met with a largely positive, if condescending reception. The intriguing thing about the book was that it was published as jointly authored by Abdullah and Ray Matthews, though many of the stories were first published individually as Abdullah's. Matthews was a reasonably well known poet and journalist of the period. The extent to which he indeed co-authored or contributed to the stories needs to be examined. This requires a comparison of the original manuscripts and the various versions of the stories until they appear in book form under the joint authorship. My conjecture is that like the first slave narratives which always appeared with several authenticating documents by white writers, Abdullah's early diasporan text in Australia also needed a similar method of legitimation and validation. As a strategy to gain entry into a dominant culture, it had to disguise itself and also to mask its own radical difference. At any rate, under their jointly authored version, the stories did very well indeed, even being prescribed as school texts, presumably because they showed how good immigrants behave when they come to a new country.

Sharrad shows how, to all appearances, this is a text of collusion and conformity. A somewhat simpleminded postcolonialist reading would regard the book merely as "an old-fashioned work

collaborating uncritically with the white settler nationalist project" (253). The naïve child narrator, according to such a reading, enables "the white adult reader to feel benignly condescending towards all kinds of difference represented" (Ibid).

However, such a facile reading would do injustice to the complexity of the narrative. As Sharrad shows:

Identity remains very much a conflictual and central issue across *Time of the Peacock* in ways that can be read productively from a contemporary viewpoint. If it is not stridently oppositional, it is nonetheless, not simply or passively consenting to assimilation. The co-authorship, for example, can be read not as capitulation to the mainstream so much as a strategic means of intervention into it and a resistance to exclusivist notions of ethnicity. The troubled intersections of national, ethnic, linguistic, religious, class and gender identities fragment homogenising essentialist constructions. (Ibid.)

As the conclusion of the story "Mirbani" demonstrates, the diasporic space is neither India nor Australia, though it had strong connections with both:

'It is not India,' said Father'

And it is not the Punjab,' said Uncle Seyed.'

It is just us,' said Ama.

("Mirbani" 31)

Invoking Homi K. Bhabha, Sharrad calls this third space "untranslatable" because it is not a simple re-rendering of the South Asian home in the transplanted space of the Australian nation, but a secret time, the time of the peacock, that signifies private experiences and illuminations. *The Time of the Peacock*, then, is not merely a straightforward prescription for assimilation, offered through the device of a child narrator, that recommends how immigrants should leave their old cultures behind and adjust themselves to their new environment. It suggests, rather, a more complex engagement with a new land that calls into question inherited values and cultural mores. In the resultant conflicts and tensions, characters learn how to grow and cope with the complexities of a

diasporic existence. I would, however, admit that the dominant culture of the host country is not interrogated as consistently or rigorously as that of the homeland.

Contrarily, in the contemporary phase of South Asian Australian literature, the adopted or host country also comes in for criticism. In one of the most eloquent and moving accounts of this predicament, Chandani Lokuge in her first novel, *If the Moon Smiled* (2000), shows the isolation, alienation, and loneliness of her female protagonist, Manthri, as she negotiates the difficult journey from Sri Lanka to Australia. In this novel it is as if Nimmi, Mena Abdullah's child protagonist in *The Time of the Peacock*, has grown up. Not only for reasons of brevity or symmetry do I choose texts by women writers as representative of the two periods, but because the experience of expatriation is perhaps unpacked with much greater poignancy by women writers. In Manthri's case, it is literally a double expatriation. First she has to leave the safe, secure, and idyllic home of her father, the place of her artless fantasies for self-fulfilment, a green and innocent world, to go to her husband's home. Her husband, Mahendra, on utterly flimsy grounds, suspects her of infidelity, or should I say, "impurity." He thinks that she is not a virgin because the white bed sheet remains unstained; she hasn't bled on their wedding night as he expects a virgin to. Her crime in her husband's eyes is severe because she hasn't been faithful to her husband-to-be. Manthri, though blameless, feels guilty partly because on her wedding night she has fantasised making love to the handsome and virile Thilakasiri, a farm hand who works on her father's estate. The unstained bed sheet, crumpled but utterly white, continues to haunt Manthri's marriage, even when she and her husband, immigrate to Australia. This journey symbolises her second expatriation. First she has left her father's home; now she has left her fatherland.

Manthri's passivity and propensity to suffer stoically may be attributed to her traditional upbringing. The weight of the ancient Buddhist traditions combined with centuries of patriarchy makes her more acted upon than acting. Several rites of purification and penance have marked even her first menstruation marking her transition from girlhood to womanhood. Every such rite of passage comes with its own trials and traumas. If marriage brings her her husband's continual coldness and disapproval, motherhood brings her a disobedient and delinquent son. If Devake is unable to live up

to his father's expectations, Nelum, the daughter, who is a brilliant student, also rebels. Refusing to marry the "boy" chosen for her by her father, she runs away from home. Shattered, Manthri returns to her father and to Sri Lanka, even teaches in a school for some time, trying to recover, but has to return to Australia. What choices does she have? Adultery? A furtive, but passionate relationship, as dangerous as it is alluring? Unable to do even that, unhappy and distraught, she suffers a nervous breakdown and has to be institutionalised. Her fate always to be in the hands of others, she seems like a doomed creature without choices. Despite its lyrical passages and evocative prose, Lokuge's novel paints a very grim picture of Manthri's life.

Moving back and forth between Sri Lanka and Australia, the novel grounds the diasporan experience in older cycles of karma, dukkha, and transmigration. After years in Australia, when Manthri returns to Sri Lanka, she finds a country under siege:

Home at last. To set foot on Lankan soil. Each time I come back, I know I have been away too long. It is a tranquil night. I walk the short distance to the terminal. The security is frightening. I have to avoid walking into a bayonet. They all seem pointed at me. (153)

The tropical paradise of her childhood has been turned into an army camp bristling with guns. It is here that Nelum runs away the night before her arranged marriage to an eligible and upper caste groom. Home, as it used to be, offers no solace to Manthri. Her return to Australia is not that much better either:

I face Australia once more. Like the first time, in the whitening dawn. But alone. The breeze fondles my neck and stiffens it. I pull the collar of my overcoat tightly across my body. My knees seem encased in ice. I seem to be losing control of my legs. I cling to my trolley. (190)

The bayonets of the army are here replaced by the icy chill, the numbness of abandonment and isolation. It is not as if Mahendra, the husband, is much better off in the end. After Manthri has been hospitalised and both children gone from their home, he finds himself lost and disoriented: "He pauses now and then, feeling frail and grey," but "he will not admit to loneliness" (204). What is worse,

despite all the years that have passed, "He has not forgiven himself, nor her." Unforgiving, unforgiven he lives in his own kind of hell.

The story that Lakuge's novel tells is one of disintegration and dispersal, not of the movement from one home to another. Once the homeland is lost, it cannot be retrieved, not just because no return to the past is possible, but also because the homeland itself is war-torn. The parents who represented solidity and solace for Manthri are now old and weak; the expensive Pajero in which she is picked up from the airport to be taken to their country estate cannot protect either Manthri or her family for the ravages of time. Australia, despite its prosperity and opportunities does not give Manthri the freedom to develop a new self. Instead, its relentless pressures shatter the fragile unity of her beleaguered nuclear family. Both the children grow up and drift away. The icy barrier between the husband and the wife neither melts nor is it overcome. Both end up isolated and empty.

To say the least, attitudes to both the homeland and to Australia are ambivalent in this novel. Both countries and systems come under criticism for different reasons. The rigid and hidebound traditions of Sri Lanka are seen to constrict lives and limit human happiness, just as Independence and individuality of modern Australia draw people apart and render them isolated. The novel does not offer any solutions, but instead shows characters to be severally handicapped in what they can do to obtain their own happiness. Neither Manthri's passivity nor Mahendra's assertiveness saves either of them from the existential pain and suffering that seems to be their fate. Their move from Sri Lanka to Australia, in this sense, cannot be considered a progression or even a evolution from one state to another, but a transition that does not reduce their susceptibility to emotional and psychic distress. The void and futility at the heart of life's journeys is highlighted in a poignant but wordless exchange between Manthri and her mother-in-law. The latter, too, has lost her son, it would seem, for nothing because Manthri hasn't really gained a husband either:

But how can there be such easy solutions? Her last words, so swollen with unspoken accusations, hurl me into silence: 'It is too late, I think, Manthri, to make amends. I thought that by crossing the seas he would begin a new life. So I gave him my blessings. But how can we cross the chasm that estranges us from ourselves?' (126)

In the context of the novel, the estrangement of diaspora, the sorrow of the passage across the black water, is only a part of the larger alienation of human beings from themselves. Certainly, traditions, customs, practices, the false expectations and values that people adhere to, the hardness and coldness of hearts, the pressures of living in a new country, the clash of the new and the old worlds, the independence and self-assertiveness of children—all contribute to this essential self-estrangement. But the sense of doom seems to run deeper and is irreducible. Speckled with fleeting passages of beauty though it may be, the novel is elegiac in tone, moving forwards if only into an inexorable gloom.

Part II: South Asian Canada

In this portion of my paper, I look for ways of mapping the South Asian Canadian attitudes to the homeland. In his essay, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism" Ramraj refers to two key types of diasporas, traditionalist and assimilationist (217). The former retains its separate identity, while the latter gradually merges with the mainstream of the host country and, eventually, ceases to regard itself as a diaspora. These two positions are closely related to the host country's own attitude to the diaspora. Milton Israel, citing Christopher Bagely's work, outlines the types of responses that mark the receiving society's response to South Asian immigrants: "1) Ethnocentric and opposed to their culture, values and lifestyle; 2) accommodating and understanding of the context of cultural transfer" (10). He also notes two corresponding models of the South Asian immigrant response: "the effort to maintain ties with the motherland; and acculturation and adaptation to the host society" (10-11). In the South Asian experience in Canada, we find both attitudes present through a complex layering. It is this complexity that I propose to map out, suggesting a broad attitudinal patterning for each of its layers.

Uma Parmeswaran in "Ganga in Assiniboine: Prospects for Indo-Canadian Literature" identifies four phases of the immigrant experience to Canada: 1) the experience of encountering the "vastness and harshness of the Canadian landscape," which she believes the South Asians missed out totally because they went basically to cities (83). 2) "the struggle of the immigrants to establish themselves in their own esteem and in society" (83). Again,

Parmeswaran believes that South Asians haven't achieved this totally because, despite being settled financially, they still feel unsettled (84). 3) Second-generation Canadians of South Asian origin, "realize that home is here, not elsewhere" (85). 4) "the affirmation that home is here but 'here' is not exclusively English ... but a place where one can be oneself, assimilating if one is comfortable doing so, being different if one chooses to be so" (85). That is, there are Canadians who write in Punjabi, Gujarati or English, but yet almost no of them has produced works set in Canada.

In a later essay, "Literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada: An Overview," Parmeswaran offers another chronological description of the South Asian diaspora in general and then applies that framework to Canada. She talks of "two very distinct waves of emigration," one which took place during the colonial period, and the other after independence. The first wave consists of three phases: indentured labourers, traders, and educated people. The first phase of the first wave doesn't apply to Canada where no indentured labourers came. Instead, farmers from Punjab, hearing accounts of cheap, virgin land from Sikh soldiers passing through Canada, arrived in the first decade of the 20th century (7). However, further immigration was blocked after the infamous *Komagatu Maru* incident of 1914. The second wave, starting in the early 1950s, is also divided into phases, each a decade long. The 1960s "may be called the gold rush period"(6); the 1970s are dubbed as the reactionary decade; the 1980s "brought into the open the racism that till then had been latent and covert" (7). While Parmeswaran doesn't predict what the 1990s would be like, they might be called the decade of multiculturalism.

While I find Parmeswaran's work extremely useful, I think it is simpler to conceive of the South Asian diaspora in Canada in four distinct layers, each with its own literature. The first consists of the 5000 immigrants that came to Canada from 1905-1908 and their descendents. The literature of this group was, until recently, mostly oral and unrecorded. The early texts of this group are not easily available.

The second group consists of Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African immigrants. Their forefathers had already left India as a part of the old, colonial diaspora of the 19th century and early 20th century. More recently, they moved farther north west, from Africa or the

Caribbeans, to Canada. A good number of the well-known South Asian Canadian writers, including Neil Bissoondath, Cyril Dabydeen, Ramabai Espinet, Reshad Gool (Ved Devajee) Arnold Itwaru, Ismith Khan, Harold Sonny Ladoo, Farida Karodia, Sam Selvon, and M.G.Vassanji, belong to this group.

The third group consists of those who have come to Canada directly from the sub-continent after 1960. This group is made up mostly of highly educated, professional, upwardly mobile workers and professionals. Writers like Anita Rau Badami, Himani Bannerji, Rana Bose, Saros Cowasjee, Rienzi Cruz, Lakshmi Gill, Surjeet Kalsey, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee (the Canadian phase, that is), Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parmeswaran, Balachandra Rajan, Ajmer Rode, Suwanda Sugunasiri, and others, belong to this group. What is interesting is that this group may be further sub-divided into two categories by their choice of language. The dominant category includes those who write in English, the language of international power and prosperity. But in recent years, a body of rich literature in Punjabi and Hindi has also taken root in Canada. There is, thus, a new *vernacular* tradition in diasporic literature that demands our attention.

Finally, there is a fourth group which includes the descendants of those who may belong to any of the three mentioned above. These are writers born and brought up in Canada. Their links with India are at best tenuous and tentative. Yet, culturally, they form a distinct voice within multicultural Canada.

What kind of generalizations might possibly be made about these four distinct layers or groups within the South Asian diaspora? It seems to me that three of these four groups may be defined more effectively by the setting of most of their writings. For instance, the second group consisting of Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African writers depict what we could call an "in-Canada" experience. "West Indian Writing in Canada," Ramraj observes, "is largely *immigrant writing*, preoccupied with the complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences associated with leaving one society and adjusting to another" (102). In the Canadian context, this is usually the experience of the hostility and racism encountered by the immigrant and of the transition from the older diasporic homeland to the new, northern home in Canada. These writers may take either a traditionalist or an assimilationist stance, or a retreatist vs. integrationist stance, but I would still

consider their work as moving away from the homeland *towards* Canada. The fourth group, too, writes mostly about the Canadian experience; in fact, their stance is not only *towards* Canada, but *within* Canada. There is no other homeland for them to compare their present location with; Canada is the only homeland they know. Yet, their heritage distinguishes them from "unmarked" or default Canadians. Their texts attempt to explore the special challenges and problems of their Canadian, albeit hyphenated identities.

The third layer or group of South Asian immigrants, however, writes mostly about India or the subcontinent. In her highly perceptive essay, "Ganga in the Assiniboine": Uma Parmeswaran citing Suwanda Sugunasiri's survey of South Asian Canadian writers, observes: "Surjeet Kalsey, of Vancouver, has compiled the Panjabi [sic] section of the study. She lists approximately 75 poets, 30 short-story writers, and a few novelists and playwrights. However, except for rare pieces, like a drama on the *Komagata Maru* episode, produced in 1979, these writers seem to have altogether eschewed the Canadian setting. Pragna Enros's compilation of Gujarati writing shows the same trend" (85). This is also true of those who write in English. No writer has produced, to my knowledge, a major work set in Canada. So the great Canadian or millennial novel, one that will do justice to the totality of the Canadian, multicultural experience is yet to be written by a South Asian Canadian writer.

The fact that this group of Indo-Canadian writers keep going back to India for their fictional material might suggest that they are moving away from Canada, towards India or the homeland, in the classic, Jewish sense of the diaspora. However, I am not sure this is the case. If one considers Rohinton Mistry, perhaps the most gifted and respected of this group, one notices that his two novels *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* are elegiac, not nostalgic in tone. They do not celebrate the homeland but mourn its relentless and innumerable atrocities and tragedies. If I had more time to prove my point I would attempt to show that what they actually enact is a farewell to India, not a passage to India. In that sense, despite what such texts appear to be, they in fact end up demonstrating a self-legitimizing logic of leaving the homeland behind and, therefore, at least indirectly, of embracing the new diasporic home. These texts justify, in subtle and indirect ways, the immigrant writers' subject position and the cultural choices that such a position entails. However, I would not like to simplify the issue of the location of culture by

implying that place of residence is identical to a cultural position or that the politics of culture is solely determined by the place of residence. What is more likely is that instead of worshipping the leftovers and relics of a now inaccessible homeland as the old diaspora of indentured labourers did, the new diaspora of international Indian English writers lives close to their market, in the comforts of the suburbia of advanced capital but draws their raw material from the inexhaustible imaginative resources of that messy and disorderly subcontinent that is India.

Thus, what seems to be a longing for the homeland, is actually a critique of the host country, a plea for better terms of living and assimilation. To give a concrete example, the speaker in Lakshmi Gill's poem, "Out of Canada," complains that she can't die here in Canada and wishes, instead, to "sit at the foothills of the Himalayas/ and leave hard Canada for the hardy Canadians":

I cannot die here, on the streets
Of Moncton, I tell myself over and over—
people wouldn't know where to send my body.
I cannot die here in this country
Where would I be buried? ...

(*The Geography of Voice* 50)

But, to my mind, the longing that the poem expresses is actually a veiled plea for belonging to a more receptive, friendly, equitable, and less racist, alienating, or strange Canada, where at the end of it all, her bones can find not just a place to rest, but the peace that comes with homecoming.

In a sense, the poem illustrates how diasporic women in general experience multiple repression as a function of what Israel calls "negative status arising from race, culture, gender and class": "For the Indo-Canadian woman, lacking the traditional support system, the result is often isolation and alienation" (11). Citing the work of Joshephine Naidoo, he mentions "self-paced acculturation" as the strategy adopted by Indian women. Canada offers "cultural self-determination" and "culture-based creativity" while forcing immigrants to conform to general societal norms (11-12). Therefore, what Gill's speaker will do eventually, is to seek such "self-paced acculturation" to get used to living and, indeed, dying in Canada."

In this respect, these novels are a part of a larger process of moving away from the homeland towards the host country. In a descriptive scheme designed as early as 1965, Johan D. Speckerman, talks of the following five phases of diasporic experience: "(1) immigration (causing social disarray and anomie); (2) acculturation (a reorientation of traditional institutions and the adoption of new ones); (3) establishment (growth in numbers, residential footing and economic security); (4) incorporation (increased urban social patterns and the rise of a middle class); and (5) accelerated development (including greater occupational mobility, educational attainment, and political representation)" (cited in Clarke et al 3). To put it differently, Mistry's winning the Governor-General's medal and other honours in Canadian society for his work on *India* suggests not just the rewards of writing novels which are critical of homelands, but do not threaten the host country. It also indicates Mistry's effort to say farewell to India and to accelerate his development as a Canadian citizen.

Ultimately, however, the diasporic experience need not be reduced to either a simple-minded rejection of the homeland and acceptance of the home country, or vice-versa. What happens, especially to the writers in the third category, is a more complex process of confluence. Akin to what Homi Bhabha calls hybridization, this process is not a superimposition of one culture on the other, nor is it a facile transplantation. As Parneswari puts it in "Ganga in the Assiniboine: Prospects for Indo-Canadian Literature":

Every immigrant transplants part of his native land to the new country, and the transplant may be said to have taken root once the immigrant figuratively sees his native river in the river that runs in his adopted place; not Ganga *as* the Assiniboine or the Assiniboine *as* the Ganga, both of which imply a simple transference or substitution, but Ganga *in* the Assiniboine, which implies a flowing into, a merger that enriches the river. The confluence of any two rivers is sacred for the Hindu ethos, perhaps because it is symbolic of this enrichment. In the literary context of the immigrant experience this image has an added dimension. At the confluence, the rivers are distinct, and one can see the seam of the two separate streams as they join" (79-80).

Earlier, in the summer of 2000, I actually stood with Parmeswar at such a confluence of the Assiniboine and Red rivers in Winnipeg, the city she has lived for the last thirty-five years. She pointed to the merging streams and said, "Look, can you see that the two rivers have different colours?" When I watched carefully, I noticed that she was right. One was mud red, while the other looked a greenish gray. I thought that was an apt metaphor for the Indo-Canadian experience; it was impossible to determine where the one ended and the other began.

This third group of South Asian Canadian writers are in the privileged position of actually seeing the distinct strands of their lives merge to create a new type of culture. Perhaps, their children, the writers who belong to the fourth layer, don't have this privilege. To them is give a different task, of disentangling or describing the features of their merged or hyphenated identities. It is only this third group that have access to the Indian and the Canadian, both separately *and* together.

Conclusion

I have compared two sets of South Asian diasporic texts, one from Australia, and the other from Canada, so as to show both their similarities and differences. The Australian texts, fewer in number as they are, fall into essentially two periods or categories, the early or the naïve phase and the contemporary phase. The Canadian texts, on the other hand, show four distinct phases, but are more readily divided by whether their works are set in India or in Canada. While most of the Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African Canadian writers address the "in Canada" experience, the post 1960 immigrants who have come directly to Canada from India seem to hark back to their Indian roots for literary raw material. Yet, this apparent harking back to the mother country, India, actually camouflages the drive towards Canada. Despite these differences, both sets of texts display their special kinds of ambiguity and ambivalence, both in their identity politics and to their attitudes to the homeland/adopted country.

It will not suffice, however, to end this paper by leaving unchallenged the notion of ambivalence itself. Clearly, "ambivalence" as the ubiquitous/generic/global diasporic response to both

homelands and countries of residence is unsatisfactory. Taking recourse to a generalised sense of ambivalence to explain both Australian/Canadian attitudes to South Asia and South Asian diasporic attitudes to Australia/Canada would, thus, be tantamount to substituting older false clarities with newer, perhaps equally false, indeterminacies. Instead, I propose to sketch, albeit briefly, the specificities of these ambivalences.

As I have already suggested, both kinds of ambivalence—what the host country feels towards its Others and what the South Asian diaspora feels for the host country—have a deep connection with the crisis of nation and nationality. In Australia's case, it had to do with how to reconcile an imperial legacy of oppression with its own racist response to Aborigines and immigrants, while in Canada's case there is a similar history of oppression of the first nations and of coloured immigrants. In his new book *Ornamentalism*, David Cannadine argues that it was class, not race that drove the British empire. Revolted by the breakdown of the class system in England, British ruling classes sought to create an idealised world of class hierarchy in their empire. But, I believe that in effect class and race are intertwined. In the case of Australia; the two hierarchies support one another. As the British looked down upon the Australians, the Australians looked down upon the immigrants. Australian resistance to and collaboration with the imperial project served the needs of Australian nationalism and identity-formation. In a way, it was an example of an Australian primordialism that served to legitimate the nation state. Later, the initial paranoia gave way to an acceptance of multiculturalism as Australia attempted to reconcile itself to its racist past, and to fashion a new future. One could make a similar argument for Canada substituting Britain in the later years by the US.

The ambivalence of the South Asian diaspora in these countries is also linked with the crisis of nationalism, but from the other, postnational end, as it were. As deterritorialised and dislocated communities, diasporas have a special need to forge their own sense of location wherever they are. While older diasporas fetishised the homeland, the new diasporas commodify it. This difference is easily seen when we compare the work of M.G. Vassanji and Rohinton Mistry. While *Uhuru Street* and *The Gunny Sack*. That is why I have argued that though Indo-Canadian writers seem to be go back almost compulsively to an India they've bid goodbye to,

their real target or focus is Canada. These "passages to India" are actually away-from-India and toward Canada narratives. I have tried to illustrate this movement in the works of writers like Rohinton Mistry

In the case of the Indo-Australian texts, a clear pattern is yet to emerge though I definitely sense a pervasive and unresolved biculturalism in most of them. Many of the authors resort to a generational divide or progression to resolve the contrary pulls of the homeland and country of residence. On both sides, then, there is a resistance and reconciliation at work, even if the resistance is vigorous and the reconciliation reluctant.

The two Australian texts that I have chosen illustrate, in other words, two different kinds of ambivalence. Each of them tries to create its own unique sense of locality in face of the experience of displacement. To my mind, Abdullah's stories are less threatening because they succeed in creating a sense of neighbourhood as a concrete, material reality in the new country, Australia. I use the word neighbourhood as an actual and situated community, in a definite spatial context, in contrast to "virtual" communities of various kinds. Lokuge's book, on the other hand, illustrates what Appadurai has termed the "growing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity, and collective social movement" (189). In that sense, locality does lose its "ontological moorings" in *If the Moon Smiled*, becoming instead, inverted and introverted. It is no longer spatial and social, but assumes a complex phenomenological dimension, mediated through the anguished inscape of Manthri's mind. None of the relief of a virtual neighbourhood enabled and produced through Internet or electronic media is offered here, nor solace in larger projects of transnational identity and solidarity, but only the solitude and anomie of subjectivities under stress. There is no release here into a postmodern free play where the self can gloriously and continuously reinvent itself depending on the context and contingency. Instead, we see only withdrawal and breakdown.

But whether the diasporic passage is successful, as in Abdullah, or unsuccessful as in Lokuge, its trajectory is marked by a unique provocation to produce new localities. That these localities cannot be easily absorbed or subsumed by the existing nation state, whether of the homeland or the host country, is, I am sure, obvious. In fact, neither of the two texts that I've chosen is typical in this regard of the literature of South Asian diaspora in Australia. If

anything, each is rather unusual and challenging. Yet I have made a case to consider them representative texts of the two periods of this literature, the earlier quiet period and the more loquacious contemporary one. My purpose has been to show that the experience of diaspora is marked by a series of ambivalences and indeterminacies. It is an interstitial site that is somehow untranslatable either to the dialect of the homeland or the language of the adopted country. Instead, it mirrors the ambivalence that the host country feels towards its minorities and racial Others, even as it interrogates the certitudes and solaces of the irretrievable homeland that it has left behind. It is this tenuousness that gives it its rich ambiguity and complexity. My purpose is not to suggest that all texts of the diaspora are major literary works, but that they certainly point to and promise an area of fertile cultural possibilities.

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Going By the Book: Textual Materialism in V.S.Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*

Jharna Sanyal

The widows were now almost frantic to have their children educated. There was no longer a Hanuman House to protect them; everyone had to fight for himself in a new world, the world Owad and Shekhar had entered, where *education was the only protection....*

...And all the evening ...there were sounds of flogging...and Basdei cried, '*Read! Learn! Learn! Read!*' (*A House for Mr. Biswas*, 436-7; emphasis mine)¹

I

When in his 1835 *Minute on Education* Macaulay insisted on replacing the indigenous systems of education in India by the British one he had politically envisioned the role the English system could most effectively play in the Imperial scheme of relationships between the ruler and the ruled. Gouri Visvanathan has demonstrated the way literary education and texts were employed to construct and nurture colonial subjectivity. Macaulay's arguments in favour rested on the superiority of English literature and the 'use'-value of the language:

'[w]hoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations. It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all in all the languages of the world together' (Allen and Tribedi 199).

English, in the colonial set up, of course had its historical, political and pragmatic relevance and necessity. However, in India the Anglicist system could not completely erase the Oriental systems; the best brains culled their intellectual sustenance from both the traditions.

In locations like the Caribbean, with its economic, cultural and intellectual environment, English education had succeeded in becoming an effective mechanism to 'form' the native subjects right from the schoolroom.² In their eagerness to be re-formed by the education that could lead them to a promising prospect, to a different life, childhood was pawned to acquire the tantalizing gift of English education. Like George Lamming, Merle Hodge, Ema Brodber and many other Caribbean writers, Naipaul too writes about the ways education had been fetishized. In *A Way in the World* Naipaul recounts a meeting with a famous, black, self-made lawyer, his friend's father, who tells him, 'My father worshipped education. It was his way of giving me ambition. He was not an educated man (15)'. The lawyer carried the burden of the classics: his name Evander came from Virgil (though he knew it was from Homer). In the periphery of metropolitan culture the English books, - big, big books' measuring 'six to seven inches altogether which one is proud to possess (Naipaul 1957 : 5)'- acquired a material character :

A House for Mr. Biswas is accepted as Naipaul's classic work on the postcolonial situation. It demonstrates the effects of 'epistemic violence (Spivak, 76)' and the formation of the colonial subject. It is a book about books: a book about books as things, as pieces of furniture, books as protecting and providing agents, as estranging agents as well; of books as sign and as signified, as signs emptied of significance. Books are both metonymy and metaphor feeding like cankers on the life of the reader impoverished and possessed. Books are a tantalizing invitation to a feast in a house with locked doors.

Who is the reader in Naipaul's text? Mr Mohun Biswas, his son Anand or are the father and the son evolutionary stages in the process of reading through which a community 'comes of age'? The *bildungsroman* teleology implied in the phrase 'coming-of-age' smacks of a familiar paradigm in colonial discourse in which the perceived infantile stage of the colonial subjects provides a political excuse for their domination. Or, is Naipaul making up fictional readers to textify his own process of reading and writing?

'A novel,' Naipaul believes, 'was something made up; that was almost its definition. At the same time it was expected to be true, to be drawn from life; so that part of the point of a novel came from half rejecting the fiction, or looking through it to reality (2000 : 22).' To the Trinidad Indians, the successors of the indented labourers, - a community, as Naipaul tells us, without a mythology of its own - the books of the metropolis were both a fiction and reality. In Lal's Canadian Mission school young Mohun Biswas was '*Learning to say*' and '*learning by heart*' (my emphasis) things 'he never seriously believed',... the history he learned was as unreal as the geography'(46). Naipul writes about this estranging effect of colonial education:

...at Mr. Worm's exhibition class, cramming hard all the way, *learning everything by heart*, living with abstractions, having a grasp of very little, was like entering a cinema sometime after the film had started and getting only scattered pointers to the story...*I never ceased to feel a stranger...I had no proper understanding of where I was, and really never had the time to find out. all spent in a blind, driven kind of colonial study*(2000 :14,16. emphasis mine).

Colonial study in a location like the Trinidad, with no indigenous literary tradition to sustain, contain and negotiate the chaos and flux of history, the books from the metropolis arrived as prefabricated structures ready to intern the imaginative life of a gathering of indentured, migrant people on the periphery of metropolitan cultures. The English language itself was a sign of wonder that could only be repeated in fragments, in approximate accents; 'buth certificates' functioned as satisfactorily as 'birth certificates' authenticating the official entry of 'only a labourer's son' in the Canadian Mission school with the incantation of 'ought oughts are ought...' By performing the language Biswas, living off the charity of his aunt Tara and uncle Ayodha gets an official entry into their house, -where his sister worked as a servant, - as a performer, as a *Brahmin* and as a *Reader*, identities contingent on his performance, identities distinct from his sister Dehuti's. (49). Ajodha could read but thought it more dignified being read to: so the school boy Biswas had to read out a syndicated American column called *That Body of Yours* which dealt everyday with a different danger to the human body to Ayodha. He wondered why Ayodha subjected himself to the torment and how Dr Samul S.

Pitkin could 'keep the column going with such regularity.' The column, the reader and the listener configure to become a paradigm of a mimetic reading practice and performance. The word and the world are the disjunctive spaces and the reader situates himself somewhere in-between here and there. The *t/hereness* of the fiction is translated to *hereness* through the ritualistic, repetitive act of reading in private and public spheres of home and school. Biswas had read *That Body of Yours* to Ayodha for a penny per session, - years later his son Anand did the same for six cents.

Here is an instance of the uncanny doubling of undifferentiated identities forged by the 'Imperial texts of theirs' to keep going the system of exploitation fed by the labour of the people and in turn, feeding their imagination with white, metropolitan mythologies³. Biswas was taken out of school when he was learning 'Bingen on the Rhine' from *Bell's Standard Elocutionist* for the visit of the school inspector. The aborted public performance uncannily haunts the private sphere of home. Anand, the son of Mr. Biswas, finding his uncle and aunt sad, recites 'Bingen on the Rhine' from *Bell's Standard Elocutionist* to 'animate' them. Hari was ill and about to die; he knew this and so did his wife; their response to the words of the dying legionnaire encouraged the innocent boy who knew nothing about Hari's state. He was pleased to see that looks of utmost solemnity replaced the smiles of Hari and his wife. Hari's wife broke into tears as the poem ended with,

'Tell her the last night of my life, for ere this moon be risen,'

'My body will be out of pain, my soul be out of prison' (415).

Anand took their response to be a sure sign of his effectiveness as a performer. Naipaul allows events to speak with their own inherent irony.

The *Standard Elocutionist*, which Biswas did not have the opportunity of returning to his Canadian Mission school when he left it, became a part of Biswas's life. It was a continuation of the past, a part of the emerging history of a person who needed to gather, collect and accumulate possessions to be accommodated in a house which he would own one day; 'Wherever he went the book went with him, and ended in the blacksmith -built bookcase in the house at Sikkim Street' (30).

II

The absurd reality or the real absurdity of this reading situation which Naipaul mercilessly portrays is a phase in the cultural history of a people gradually becoming conscious of its difference from the world of the books that came from another location. *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius & *Discourses* of Epictetus were gifts from Mrs. Weir the owner of a small sugar-estate. Mr Biswas's family perfectly appropriated them as household names in a private myth signifying superior culture: a myth that could distinguish one of the dependant sons-in-law of the Tulsi family. When there is a family quarrel Biswas commands his daughter.

'-the next time she (her aunt Chinta) opens her big mouth-you just ask her whether she has ever read Marcus Aurelius' (232). Marcus Aurelius was his refuge in distress, in loneliness and shame.

Chinta's revenge too is as bookish when she makes his son recite 'The Three Little Piggies. By Sir Alfred Scott-Gatty' (233). In the private circle of the family the recital is another of the performances through which another dependant member of Hanuman House claims her right to dignity. In a public sphere, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus had their rightful owners, readers and interpreters. When Biswas appears for an interview with the editor of a newspaper, this is how the dialogue proceeds:

'I have read a lot.' Mr. Biswas said,...

The editor played with a slab of lead.

' Hall Caine, Marie Corelli, Jacob Boehme, Mark Twaine. Hall Caine, Mark Twaine, Mr Biswas repeated.

'Samuel Smiles.'

The editor looked up.

'Marcus Aurelius.'

The editor smiled.

'Epictetus.'

The editor continued to smile, and Mr Biswas smiled back, to let the editor know that he knew he was sounding absurd.

'You read those books for pleasure,eh.?'

Mr Biswas recognized the cruel intent of the question, but he did not mind. 'No,' he said, 'Just for the encouragement.'...(320-1)

The smile, the look, the cruel intent of the question divest Mr Biswas of all his learning, nullify all his efforts at educating himself to reassign him a job and put him 'in *his* place.' He had sought the interview with the editor for a job as a writer; he got the job he had begun his career with, -that of a sign painter. Outside the enclosure of the newspaper office the effigy of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus painted, 'No Admittance...No Entry...No Hands Wanted.' Metonymically refigured, Mr Biswas, the marginal man at home, is reduced to one of the multitudes of hands serving the interest of metropolitan power.

III

The 'No Admittance', 'No Entry' sign, which Biswas painted on the wall, could be read as an official authentication of the personal feeling of being debarred from entering into the world of the English and European texts. In his unsuspecting childhood, Biswas had read the descriptions of bad weather in foreign countries with delight; they had the mesmerizing quality of making him forget the heat and the sudden rain, which was all he knew. But the process of maturation through the sundry phases of failed sign-painter, driver, overseer, and shopkeeper forced him to acknowledge that, though his philosophical books gave him solace they were not suited to his situation. The novels of Hall Caine and Marie Corelli introduced him to intoxicating worlds...they made him despair of finding romance in his own dull green land (78). Reading alienated him from his own location by re-presenting its difference as lack.

His experience of Samuel Smiles was no different. This Victorian cult author propagating, with illustrations, the reward of Self-Help, Duty, Courage, Patience, Endurance, Thrift and other virtues gripped the imagination of the Industrial and Imperial nation. Material success and consequent class-mobility were supposed to follow these properties of character. Naipaul foregrounds the epistemic locations in the signifying process:

[h]e stayed in the back trace and read Samuel Smiles. He had bought one of his books in the belief that it was a novel, and had become an addict. Samuel Smiles was as romantic and satisfying

as any novelist, and Mr Biswas saw himself in many Samuel Smiles heroes: he was young, he was poor, and he fancied he was struggling. But there always came a point when resemblance ceased. The heroes had rigid ambitions and lived in countries where ambitions could be pursued and had a meaning. He had no ambition, and in this hot land, apart from opening a shop or buying a motorbus, what could he do? What could he invent? Dutifully, however, he tried. He bought elementary manuals of science and read them; nothing happened; he only became addicted to elementary manuals of science. He bought the seven expensive volumes of *Hawkins' Electrical Guide*, made rudimentary compasses, buzzars, and doorbells, and learned to wind an armature. Beyond that he could not go. Experiments became more complex, and he did not know where in Trinidad he could find the equipment mentioned so casually in Hawkins. His interest in electrical matters died, and *he contented himself with reading about the Samuel Smiles heroes in their magic land.* (78-79, my emphasis)

In marginal spaces where the intimations of the hegemonic center is disseminated through innocuous literary specimens, a book written to 'impress' and 'invigorate' young minds [Smiles, 10] to meaningful action leading to progress and prosperity is disinvested of its intended purpose and read as a fairy tale. It is not only readers, but also locations of reading that reinvest texts with meaning.

Like Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, Samuel Smiles also had become a part of the private myth: when his wife points out that they are not doing anything in the shop they have started, Biswas replies, 'All right, Mrs. Smiles... You want me to make the spinning jenny and the flying shuttle? Invent the steam engine?' (192) Samuel Smiles 'depressed him acutely' (182, 159). Yet, Smiles was passed on to his son Anand; Biswas read Anand *Self-Help* and on his birthday gave him *Duty*. The young boy 'following the example of those Samuel Smiles heroes who had in youth concealed the brilliance of their later years, did what he could to avoid school.' Biswas had to remind him that 'pranks' were a part of the myth of English composition.' (382) Between father and son they enact the different phases of the lives of the Samuel Smiles heroes only to 'realize the fictional potential of metropolitan discourses and the debilitating power of reading. In the changing situation of Trinidad, when others were making money

in contact with the American people, driving American's in their taxis, hiring out their lorries to them, buying new houses and cars...' Mr. Biswas found himself barred from this money, despite Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, despite Samuel Smiles (438).

IV

Remembering his early readings, Naipaul wrote,

'[v]ery soon I got to know that there was a further world outside, of which our colonial world was only a shadow. This outer world-England principally, but also the United States and Canada-ruled us in everyway. It sent us governors and everything else we lived by: ...

It sent us textbooks...and question papers...the films that fed our imaginative life...the Everyman's Library and Penguin Books and the Collins Classics. It sent us everything...

The books themselves I couldn't enter on my own. I didn't have the imaginative key. Such social knowledge as I had – a faint remembered village India and a mixed colonial world seen from the outside – didn't help with the literature of the metropolis. I was two worlds away' (2000, 16).

In this shadow -life standing in a void reading induced pathological symptoms of 'depression', 'addiction', 'frenzy', 'delirium', 'fear'. Political books provided Biswas with phrases only to speak to himself and use to his wife; they increased his helplessness and isolation. It is at this point Biswas discovered the solace of Dickens. In the grotesques of Dickens everything he feared and suffered from was ridiculed and diminished, so that his anger, his own contempt became unnecessary. Putting himself on the side of the grotesque Biswas discovers himself as well: his world is something more than an innocuous shadow, - it is a caricature, a burlesque or a parody that survives and sustains itself through acts of mindless repetition. As a signifier of authority, the English book, as Bhabha points out, 'acquires its meaning *after* the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial... (107).' A reader like Biswas discovers his origins in Dickens's grotesques. The moment of discovery is paradoxically a moment of repetition.

The only recuperating performance would be to reclaim oneself. Indoctrinated to think that history is that which grows out of achievement Biswas, like the schoolboys in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, was deeply convinced that he had no story/history of his own to narrate (48). His experiences of reading the master-narratives of the metropolis, his soul-denying role of the grotesque ventriloquist ultimately impinge on him the necessity of finding his own voice. Biswas begins to tell his children about his childhood, - the story of poverty, suffering and homelessness. Samuel Smiles heroes begin being replaced by the heroes of Trinidad whom education helped to locate themselves in the metropolis. However, the geographical re-location does not guarantee any freedom of mind. Owad, back from England lives off names like Eliot,

'Eliot,' he told Anand. 'Used to see him a lot. American, you know. *The Wasteland*. *The Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Let us go then, you and I. Eliot is a man I simply loathe'.

And at the school Anand said, 'Eliot is a man I simply loathe'; and added, 'I know someone who knows him.' (544)

Living in the outskirts of metropolitan Modernism and brought up on the poems in the *Royal Reader* and *Bell's Standard Elocutionist*, Biswas, the aspiring writer, understood little of Lorca, Eliot and Auden. He too was oppressed by a sense of loss: but not of the present loss but of something missed in the past. He read a lot of modern prose; knew all about faceless heroes and absence of endings but his own efforts were the series of unfinished stories he failed to complete. Biswas's experience of belatedness, inadequacy and failure becomes a peripheral version of the metropolitan aesthetics of absence and loss.

V

The importance of books in *A House for Mr Biswas* may be literally substantiated by reproducing a list of books mentioned in it. Besides those already mentioned, there are *Collins Clear Type Shakespeare*, *The Bible*, *Tarzan*, *The Hunchback of Notredam*, *The Manxman*, *The Atom*, Maupassant's stories, *Book of Comprehensive Knowledge*, *Oliver Twist*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, Halevy's *History of the English People*, Hans Christian Anderson's stories, Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, *Selections from Shankaracharya*, Romain Rolland's works, Captain Daniel's *West Indian history*, *The*

Talisman. This however is not an exhaustive list. The books have varied use: *Collins Clear type Shakespeare* was often used as a tablet on which to inscribe important family events, some books could be kicked in frustration, some could be felt materially. In his ontological space books threaten Mr. Biswas, challenge him, comfort him, provide him solace, help him to negotiate, or hinder him from negotiating with his environment and milieu, they reduce him to nobody, they inspire him to be somebody. Books thus become an integral component in the making of the subjects of such 'half-made' societies.

The chapter entitled 'The Power of English Composition' is a classic re-presentation of the process of reading through which writing emerges as an act of resistance. Mr Biswas had struggled with the model compositions of the Ideal School of Journalism only to be frustrated. Anand, his son, refusing to write along the dotted lines of English composition as he was expected to do, performs a symbolic gesture; he writes as he *feels* not as he had *learnt* to write. Talking about oneself, writing about oneself one can be exorcised of the ghosts of void.

In his introductory note to Letters *Between Father And Son* Aitken writes, '[i]n these letters...lies some of the raw material of one of the finest and most enduring novels of the twentieth century: V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*.' Reading and writing are the major themes of these letters; the father urges his son, 'Read Conrad for intensity of expression, but for most part be yourself' (1999,16). 'Write straight off,...Write...Please write. The essential thing about writing is writing'(116) . Naipaul discovered his affinity with Conrad, his literary predecessor (2000,17-18) 'who offer[ed]...a vision of the world's half made societies...' (1974 : 233). The Nobel Prize committee acknowledged him as 'Conrad's heir'. New genealogies, new literary mappings re-trace geographical/literary boundaries.

Naipaul denied that he had any allegorical reading in mind when he wrote *A House for Mr. Biswas*; but journeys in civilizations, and readings as well, had always an allegorical life of their own. *A House for Mr. Biswas* may be read as an allegory of the process of reading the text and the world through and in contact of which the oppressed subject can recognize the 'normative horizons (Chakrabarty, 20)' specific to his existence and pertinent to the assessment of his life and its possibilities.

Notes and References :

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1. V.S.Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, Penguin Books, 1969; First pub, Andre Deutsch, 1961. All text references are from this edition.

2. In *The Mystic Masseur*, the Headmaster of the school in Port of Spain where Ganesh was serving as a teacher reminded him that 'the purpose of the school is to form and not to inform (14)'.

3. A symptomatic example of this may be found in Erna Brodber's *Myal* where we find Kipling's *White Man's Burden* is recited in a Jamaican primary classroom (6).

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Narratives of the Nation : *The Moor's Last Sigh*

Chandreyee Niyogi

Mothermess – excuse me if I underline the point – is a big idea in India, may be our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet. Ladies-o, gents-o, I'm talking *major* mother country.

(The Moor's Last Sigh)

Who a child has not seen drinking mother's milk
At bright breasts of Mother, rags she wears or silks?
Love of mild Mother like rain-racked gift of cloud.
In poet's words, Mother to thee I bow.

...

We are all masters, each a Raja or Rani,
No slave, or high or low, says Makhijani.
Liberty, equality, fraternity, justice as in Constitution
In homage of Mother we will find all solutions.

(A Suitable Boy)

Most postcolonial readings of New Literatures have so far been predicated upon the assumption that what is wrong with nation is nationalism itself, and the transnational sympathies of a community which feels itself to be essentially hybrid, or diasporic, have not quite been able to resolve the contradiction of its emergence within the discourse of nationalism, committed to vindicating the race identity of national cultures. The epigraphs with which this essay begins may suggest that Rushdie has made a volte-face upon his celebration of hybridism to take a new look at the ideology of motherhood that always inspired Indian nationalism, but now as a 'major' mother country, as distinct from many minor ones in the world diaspora of races and nations. To Vikram Seth, however, or from the perspective of his 'Suitable Boy' who is somewhat embarrassed about the mindlessness of his native nationalism, it seems ludicrous that 'homage of Mother' should be the ultimate constitutional solution to all the conflict ridden grand narratives of history.

Now that Indian television ads are opening on the horizon of globalization, with the rapturous chant of the Gayatri Mantra by Greenland dwellers and graceful Afro-American models, India's nationalism seems to have deluded all those who had laughed at its authenticity from Rushdie to Vikram Seth. Not only does it appear to be a multinational vindication of the Hindu nation, but the British Council has lately endorsed the value of 'motherness' by carrying out a survey confirming that the word 'Mother' is one of the most 'beautiful' words in all languages across the world¹. Benedict Anderson, who suggested in his Introduction to *Imagined Communities* that a Copernican, rather than a Ptolemaic model of cosmology for nations was long overdue², also reminded his readers, however, that nationalism has to be historically understood, and not merely as a derivative discourse in the context of its post eighteenth century emergence in the west that radiated to the east. It needs to be reviewed 'by aligning it not with self-consciously held ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being.'³

This article is therefore a reading of the maternal narratives in Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, in which Rushdie interweaves two discourses of civilization and modernity around the theme of Indian nationalism, cutting respectively through a pre-independence and a post-independence narrative of Mother India, both predicated upon images of mothers of the nation. One of these texts, predictably written from a western reformist perspective, attempted to represent the mothers of the nation collectively as victims of a system of oppression upon their sexual and reproductive health. Indian nationalists attributed to it an imperialist ideological intent and that stigma remained attached to the book forever. The other text was a film, in which an individualized mother of the nation as heroine is type-cast in the role of a traditional rural woman, out of which she emerges in the end by the sheer courage of her spirit, which does not even flinch at sacrificing her own son to her community's ideal of womanly honour. It is upon this problematized heroism of the mother that the foundation of rural mechanization is built and hailed as the first sign of a changing traditional society. As Rushdie describes it, this narrative is a piece of Hindu nationalist mythmaking taken over by a socialist Muslim director. Rushdie's novel is a third narrative of Mother India, in which the mother is killed by the father, leaving behind a dying black son maimed in his right hand who is called 'the Moor'.

The early twentieth century history of *Mother India* as a cultural icon can be framed within Katherine Mayo's infamous book published in 1927 and Mehboob Khan's famous film 'Mother India' produced in 1957. The potency of the adjectives universally attributed to these two cultural texts sealed their fate; Mayo's book was all but lost to history, Mehboob Khan's film became a classic for all times. Between these two landmarks, the mother-as-victim passes out of a filthy domestic confinement supposedly imposed upon her by Hindu patriarchy to the barren fields of the village-nation where she undertakes as foremost worker the responsibility of regenerating a community with a harvest for which everyone labours under her leadership. Her communal career successfully culminates in being circumscribed within the protecting arms of the Nehruvian older son, although her personal memory does not. In the last scene of the film the near senile mother seems to have lost the capacity to look forward to the development agenda that she is presiding over, continuing to see in the distant waters rejuvenating the land the blood of her younger son that she spilled herself. If it is an occasion for happiness for the community, it is for her a moment of benumbing pain.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh* Rushdie cuts to shreds Mehboob Khan's glorified image of the traditional Mother Nation embodied in Nargis, the actress-heroine who goes on to marry her deviant Hindu son in real life in an unconscious assertion of Oedipal sexuality. It is a triumph of Rushdie's magic realism, not simply as a narrative technique but as a new perspective on realism itself to be able to thus dissolve the distinction between representation and reality, which are yet so different. The Freudian suggestion, however, is blasphemous to the filmy couple as Aurora Zogoiby insists upon congratulating them for their courage with devilish relish. The conventional Mother India confronts the non-conformist in a hilarious encounter of horrified rejection of the Oedipal motif that looms large in the film almost as a destiny warded off, capable of being represented with as much blasphemy in the Hindu devotional tradition of love as a universal play of the relation between Radha and Krishna. The archetypal myth of Indian nationalism is imagined as a 'sublimation', rather than repression, or liberation of Eros.

'Even in the picture, but,' Aurora went relentlessly on, 'I knew right off that bad Birju had the hots for his gorgeous ma.'

Nargis stood speechless, open-mouthed. Vasco Miranda, who could never resist a bit of trouble-making, saw the storm brewing and made haste to join in. 'Sublimation', he offered, 'of mutual parent-child longings, is deep rooted in the national psyche. The use of names in the picture makes the meaning clear. This "Birju" moniker is also used by God Krishna, isn't it, and we know that milky "Radha" is the blue chap's one true love. In the picture, Sunil, you are made up to look like the god, and you even fool with all the girls, throwing your stones to break their womby water pots; which, admit it, is Krishna-esque behaviour. In this interpretation', and here clowning Vasco attempted unsuccessfully to convey a certain scholarly *gravitas*, 'Mother India is the dark side of the Radha-Krishna story, with the subsidiary theme of forbidden love added on. But what the hell; Oedipus-schmoedipus! Have another chhota peg.'

'Dirty talk,' said the Living Mother Goddess. 'Filthy-dirty, chhi. I heard tell that depraved artists and beatnik intellectuals came up here, but I gave you all benefit of doubt. Now I observe that I am among the blaspheming scum of the earth. How you people wallow-pollow in negative images! In our picture we put stress on the positive side. Courage of the masses is there, and also dams.'

'Bad language, eh?' mused Vasco, innocently. 'Good for you! But in the final cut the censor must have removed it.'

'Bewaqaofi!' shouted Sunil Dutt, provoked beyond endurance. 'Bleddy dumbol Not oathery, but new technology is being referred to: to wit, the hydro-electric project, as inaugurated by my goodwife in the opening scene.'

'And when you say your wife,' ever-helpful Vasco clarified, 'you mean of course, your mother.'

'Sunil, come,' said the legend, sweeping away. 'If this godless anti-national gang is the world of art, then I-tho am happy to be on the commercial side.' (p. 138)*

Aurora's irreverence is rewarded in the end by Uma's deception, representing Aurora and the Moor as players in yet another oedipal drama. But in spite of Aurora's reckless, majestic presence as the nostalgic object of modern India's desire for 'motherness', herself delighting in the secret oedipal power that she wields over her son, Aurora was not born to provide Indians any 'firm ground beneath their feet'. Relentlessly satirical in her critique of both political and cultural nationalism, Aurora is determined to rid her family of 'too many elephant gods' and to concentrate her hatred for elephant gods in the magnificent mansion she named *Elephanta*. In her adolescence she had secretly taken the life of her grandmother Epiphania, who gave shelter to all the elephant-god idols in her house. Aurora hated mothering her son who therefore rushed into adult manhood in body even as a child in mind and became old before the end of his youth. In short, Aurora was as unlike the traditional Indian mother as one could be, almost an incarnation of the 'smartyboots metropolis' that she was determined to deride. She too, lost her footing on the night of Ganesh Chaturthi while dancing her dance celestial and crashed to the rocks underneath — not quite by accident, as the novel later reveals. The sexually determined life of her son Moraes Zogoiby or 'the Moor', who might claim his descent from all the religions of the world except Hinduism and Buddhism, is little more than the recounting of the memory of his mother who overshadowed all by the scintillating freedom of her personality.

Rushdie's representation of the mother-son relationship in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is at one level a rewriting of the same critique of nationalism that Katherine Mayo inscribed in her book *Mother India*⁵ condemning the private sexual excesses of Hindu culture against Indian nationalist claims upholding a public tradition of Hindu spirituality, which, according to Mayo, was both 'selfish and materialistic'⁶.

Take a girl child twelve years old, a pitiful physical specimen in bone and blood, illiterate, ignorant, without any sort of training in habits of health. Force motherhood upon her at the earliest possible moment. Rear her weakling son in intensive vicious practices that drain his small vitality day by day. Give him no outlet in sports. Give him habits that make him, by the time he is thirty years of age, a decrepit and querulous old wreck – and will you ask what has sapped the energy of his manhood? (pp. 24-25)

Outside agencies working for the moral welfare of the Indian seem often to have adopted the method of encouraging their beneficiary to dwell on his own merits and to harp upon other's shortcomings, rather than to face his faults and conquer them. And so in the midst of an agreement of silence or flattery, you find a sick man growing daily weaker, dying, body and brain, of a disease that only he himself can cure, and with no one, anywhere, enough his friend to hold the mirror up and show him plainly what is killing him. (p. 26)

Paradoxical as it may seem, this indictment of Katherine Mayo could only provide the strongest impetus to a nationalism based only and essentially on suspicion of 'outside agencies working for the moral welfare of the Indian', herself being one of them. Yet Katherine Mayo's 'critical' 'civilized' and 'progressivist' approach to India's problems, which she insisted must be resolved in the spheres of 'public health' and 'education' was cast in the pattern of a 'displaced evangelism' that had already become dated even in colonial-imperialist discourse. Beginning in the first chapter with a focus on the filth-ridden 'native' heart of a Europeanised modern city like Calcutta which Mayo locates in Kalighat, she moves on in the conclusion to chapter five to a rhapsodic eulogy of the traditional village society of India, a point where her perspective seems to be in complete agreement with Gandhi's.

Villages – villages – villages – true homes of India, scattered, miles apart, across the open country. Each just a handful of mud-walled huts clustered beside the hole they took the mud from, now half full of stagnant water in which they wash and bathe and quench their thirst. In villages such as these live

nine-tenths of all the peoples of India. Hindu or Muhammedan alike – hardworking cultivators of the soil — simple, illiterate, peaceful, kindly, save when men steal amongst them carrying fire. (p. 68)

Passages like this enabled Mayo to pass off as a socialist in some British circles, while Indian nationalists claimed that she was an apologue of the British Empire, and was advocating a status quo in political matters. Mayo was hailed in England as a 'most eloquent sanatarian'⁷, in particular, for her words of warning to the west about 'the World Menace' of cholera and plague as arising primarily in China and India, while she condemned 'the sudden pouring in the year 1920 of hundreds of thousands of disease-sodden refugees out of Russia into western Europe'.⁸ Mayo's book opens with a focus on Calcutta and its Bengali youth in native costumes brooding over 'piles of fly-blown Russian pamphlets' (p. 13), and moves on to claim that 'Bengal was the "seat of the bitterest political unrest – the producer of India's main crop of anarchists, bomb throwers and assassins" because it was also "among the most sexually exaggerated regions of India." For Mayo there was a close link between sexual exaggeration" and the "queer criminal minds" that were behind Indian nationalism.⁹

Warning Indians against venereal diseases thus transmitted, Mayo also suggests that 'child-bearing and matters of procreation' are the (Indian) 'woman's one interest in life', owing to her place in the social system where she has no one to converse with but other women. 'Therefore, the child growing up in home learns, from the earliest grasp of word and act, to dwell upon sex relations.' Quoting Vivekananda on the idea that the spiritual sense of the phallic cult will never be understood by those 'who look at it from the physical side', Mayo reminds her reader that 'despite the scorn of the sage' 'a religion adapted to the wise alone leaves most of the sheep unshepherded.' (pp. 30-1) Again, it is from a Christian, but not quite puritanical, perspective that Mayo offers 'different systems of good and evil' of which Indian women, high caste or low caste, seem to be completely ignorant.

In fact, so far are they from seeing good and evil, that the mother, high caste or low caste, will practice upon her children – the girl 'to make her sleep well', the boy 'to make him more manly', an abuse which the boy, at least, is apt to continue dally for the rest of his life. (p. 33)

Mayo's most forceful argument was against child marriage. Quoting an apparent consensus between the Hindu Brahman's opinion¹⁰ and the fear of women like the too reticent Miss Carmichael that 'A province could be roused to madness by the forcible withdrawal of the girl child from the gods' (p. 53)¹¹, Mayo insists that the net effect of the two fears interweaving around the fear of women's sexual desire, are that 'a woman must be married before she knows she is one.' (p. 51) A third opinion raised in the Legislative Assembly debates on the matter of child marriage, 'Why should we think so much about these people [minor girls] who are able to take care of themselves', the argument for which Mayo quotes at great length, was hooted down and struck off the records (p. 54). Almost twenty years ago Sister Nivedita had come to the same conclusion about the minority of the Indian child-wife when she described Abanindranath's spiritualized *Mother India*, who was recognizable in her outer insignia of wifehood as more real than motherhood, 'at once mother and daughter of the Indian land, even as to the Rishis of yore were Ushabala, in her Indian girlhood, daughter of the dawn'.¹²

Mayo interviewed Gandhi while she was in India and corresponded with Rabindranath Tagore when she went back to America, but her book was followed by the international publicity of Gandhi's notorious comment that it was a 'drain inspector's report'. Gandhi, however, had written the article thus titled 'not for Indian readers' but primarily 'for the many American and English readers who read' *Young India* 'from week to week with sympathy and attention'. Having warned such Americans and Englishmen 'against copying Miss Mayo', for she had 'certainly not written (the book) as a reformer and out of love', Gandhi went on to make the following observation in the same article:

While I consider the book unfit to be placed before Americans and Englishmen (for it can do no good to them), it is a book that every Indian can read with some degree of profit. We may repudiate the charge as it had been framed by her but we may not repudiate the substance underlying the many allegations that she has made. It is a good thing to see ourselves as others see us. We need not even examine the motive with which the book is written. A cautious reformer may make some use of it.¹³

As Mrinalini Sinha has explored in details, the controversy over Mayo's book was followed by a spurt of reformist activity in India.¹⁴ It was also in 1927 that the Indian Women's Association was officially established under the leadership of Margaret Cousins. In the same year Gandhi published his autobiography called *My Experiments with the Truth*, stating clearly that so far, he felt he had had to remain satisfied with relative truth. 'But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him'¹⁵. The difference between the 'framing' and 'substance' of Mayo's *Mother India*, to which Gandhi drew attention, was never explored with sufficient attention and her book — which contained many passages reminiscent of the writings of Vivekananda and Gandhi — remained one of the most ambiguous and enigmatic texts on Indian nationalism. Not the least because Mayo anticipated exactly the direction along which nationalist criticism of her book would be vented. In her own words:

... I am fully aware of the resentments I shall incur: of the accusations of muck-raking; of injustice; of material-mindedness; of lack of sympathy; of falsehood perhaps; perhaps of prurience. But the fact of having seen conditions and their bearings, and of being in a position to present them, would seem to deprive one of the right to indulge a personal reluctance to incur consequences. (p. 26)

Rushdie rewrites Mayo's pet thesis that was calculated to act as a bomb shell¹⁶ on Indian complacency, but with a different emphasis. He mimics the angry voice of Katherine Mayo, enlightening the Moor as his prudish and thieving nurse, Miss Jaya. He whom he has caught selling his mother's jewels, on the continuation of horrifying sexual practices that mothers transmit to their sons.

It was during the period of thievery that Miss Jaya told me the dreadful secret of my earliest days. We were walking at Scandal Point, across the way from the big Chamchawala house, and I think I had made some remark — the Emergency, remember, was still quite new — about the unhealthy relationship between Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay. 'The whole nation is paying for that mother-son problem,' I said. Miss Jaya, who had been clucking her disapproval of the young lovers

holding hands as they walked along the sea wall, snorted disgustedly. 'You can talk,' she said. 'Your family. Perverts. Your sisters and mother also. In your baby time. How they played with you.'

I did not know, have never known, if she was telling the truth. Miss Jaya He was a mystery to me, a woman so deeply angry at her lot in life that she had become capable of the most bizarre revenges. So it was a lie, then; yes, it was probably a foul lie; but what is true – let me reveal this while I am in the mood for revelations – is that I have grown up with an unusually laissez-faire attitude towards my primary sexual organ. Permit me to inform you that people have grasped at it from time to time – yes! – or have in other ways, both gentle and peremptory, demanded its services, or instructed me how and where and with whom and for how much to use it, and on the whole I have been perfectly willing to comply. Is this quite usual? I think not, begums n' sahibs ... More conventionally, on other occasions this same organ has issued instructions of its own, and these too, I have tried – as men will – to follow if possible; with disastrous results. If Miss Jaya was not lying, the origins of this behaviour may lie in those early fondlings to which she so viciously alluded. And if I am honest I can picture such scenes, they seem completely credible to me ... Perverts. Too sick. Aurora, dancing above the Ganpati crowds, spoke of the limitlessness of human perversity. So it may have been true. It may. It may.

My god, what kind of family were we, diving together down Destruction Falls? I have said that I think of the Elephanta of those days as a Paradise, and so I do – but you may imagine to an outsider it could have looked a great deal more like Hell. (pp. 197-98)

Zogoiby the Moor is the tantalized Inheritor of a doubt that slipped under the bones of every 'civilized' Indian after Mayo's *Mother India* and Gandhi's strange review article. Was Miss He lying about traditional sexual practices in which she claimed Indians are initiated at an early age, and is the phallic drive instigated, after all by the Indian Mother herself, who, even in the form of the enlightened

Aurora, is most scathing about the limitless 'perversity' of Ganpati crowds?

The major difference between Mayo's text and Rushdie's rewriting of it is that in Mayo's book the traditional Hindu wives and mothers are represented as victims of a phallocentric order in the role of transmitters of sexual knowledge to their sons; in Rushdie's book the black son is trapped in the name of his medieval ancestor, Sultan Boabdil, given to him by an enlightened cosmopolitan individual named Aurora, the 'first and onemost' modern artist of India who only happens to be a mother by accident and is more sexually emancipated than to serve as a wife to any one man. By marriage, however, she is still tied to the inscrutable Jew Abraham Zogoiby who disapproves of the freedom of her spirit in secret vengefulness. He had started out loving Aurora, but grew suddenly apprehensive that the ugliness of life may defeat its beauty, and decided that it was better to win rather than to be on the side of defeated beauty and love. In the end his determination to win against 'the other side' translates into a battle between himself and his son.

Nevertheless, he thought, even if the world's beauty and love were on the edge of destruction, theirs would still be the only side to be on; defeated love would still be love, hate's victory would not make it other than it was. 'Better, however, to win.' He had promised Aurora looking-after, and he would be as good as his word. (p. 101)

Ignoring all the fragrant exotic imports from India like 'cardamoms, cashews, cinnamon, ginger, pistachios, cloves' and other spices and nuts, Aurora inevitably settles for pepper as the prime mover of the world. Historically, that was what the Jew and Muslim had fought about.

'it was pepper first and onemost – yes, yes, onemost, because why say foremost? Why come forth if you can come first?' (pp. 5-6)

Aurora, the First Lady, knows with unwavering certainty what the world expected from Mother India and gives it back to the world with a vengeance. The pun on the word 'forth' is also a reminder to her son that he was not her first, but fourth child after three girl children.

'From the beginning, what the world wanted from bloody mother India was daylight clear,' she'd say. 'They came for the hot-stuff, just like any man calling on a tart.' (p. 5)

Not only is Aurora both innocent and self-willed enough to cast off the proverbial veil of the Indian beauty that Bassanio compared to a 'dangerous sea' or analogous to 'the seeming truth which cunning times put on...' (p. 114), but she also finds a way, with justice, to deny Abraham's mother Flory her first born male child 'to be raised in Jewish ways'. It was a bond that Abraham undertook to get his mother's jewels, but his Mother was elated that she would have a greater jewel in the bargain. (p. 113) Abraham did not think of taking Aurora's consent in the matter, and Aurora, when she came to know of it, predictably refused to concede.

But, as the maid of Belmont denied Shylock his bloody pound, so my mother found a way, with justice, of denying Flory the child.

'Tell your mother', Aurora commanded Abraham that night, 'that there will be no children born in this house while she remains alive.' She moved him out of her bedroom. 'You do your work and I'll do mine,' she said. 'But the work Flory is waiting for, that she will never see.' (p. 115)

In the same blow Aurora cut off the shackles of her duty to her husband and mother-in-law as defined by Indian custom. Aurora's life and her husband's moved along diverging paths. Having thrown a stone-vase at her husband for whimpering at her bedroom door every night Aurora is finally free to blossom into the greatest artist of modern India, little realizing the consequences of denying her husband the sex she had enjoyed with him before marriage, because it may prove subservient to his mother's work.

Genius was being born in her, filling the empty spaces in her bed, her heart, her womb. She needed no-one but herself (p. 116).

Indeed, her first-born child was this exulting spirit of self-sufficient genius, this exhilarating freedom of the artist enveloping

her whole being, that she had refused to consecrate to her husband's mother's God.

For forty-one years Aurora also goes on to perform her annual public show on the day of the Ganapati festival in the portal of her home Elephanta 'without a care for the danger of it, without a downward glance towards the barnacled, patient boulders gnashing below her like black teeth.' It was when Abraham presented her with the magnificent mansion she called Elephanta that Aurora finally decided to engage in acts of creation with her husband. As a public spectacle, however, she is determined to dance Ganapati and Shiva Nataraja off the stage.

... she danced her contempt for the perversity of humankind, which led these huge crowds to risk death-by-trampling 'just to dumpofy their dollies in the drink,'...
(p. 124)

In her supreme contempt for human perversity which she thinks 'is greater than human heroism' Aurora sees herself as incapable of being 'squashed by gutter pressure' or 'dirtified by your black tongue', when her son, the Moor, points out that 'the crowds of the devout – wrongly, but incorrigibly – saw their own devotion mirrored in her swirling (and faithless) skirts; they assumed she too, was paying homage to the god.'

Ganpati Bappa morya, they chanted, jiggling, amid the blaring of cheap trumpets and giant conches and the hammer-blows of drug-speedy drummers with egg-white eyes and mouths stuffed with the appreciative banknotes of the faithful, and the more the legendary lady danced on her high parapet, the further above it she seemed herself to be, the more eagerly the crowds sucked her down towards them, seeing her not as a rebel, but as a temple dancer: not as a scourge, but rather the groupie, of the gods. (p. 124)

In the eyes of the devout Indian masses, there is no difference between Aurora the Mother Goddess and the gods that she is ranged against in her rebellious faithlessness, committed to eradicating human perversity. Rushdie differentiates it from her husband's lecherous faithlessness in the parenthetical comment: '(Abraham Zogoiby, as we shall see, had other uses for temple dancers)' (p.

124). In the Indian context, the traditional term for 'temple dancer' is *devdasi*, another subtext reminiscent of Mayo in her later work *Slaves of the Gods*, addressed to 'The Women of Hindu India' in which Mayo explained her reasons for choosing the term Mother India:

The title was chosen with an object. Its purpose was to awaken your intelligent patriotism and the consciousness of your men, by making inescapable the contrast between, on the one hand, florid talk of devotion and 'sacrifice' poured out before an abstract figure, and, on the other hand, the consideration actually accorded to the living woman, mother of the race.¹⁷

Before Aurora's death her son is seduced away from her by the widow Uma, a 'free spirit' who is even more 'original' than Aurora. In the eyes of Abraham Zogoiby and as godly as Aurora is godless. Once wedded to Mr. Saraswati, Uma is determined to marry the Moor because it will be the addition of another artist to the family that had become a business empire under Abraham Zogoiby. Moraes protests weakly that it is too soon but Uma sets off to convince his parents that their love is 'simply an imperative':

... it demanded, and had a right, to be. 'When I explain this to your mother and father they will come round. It is my bona-fides that they doubt? Very well then. For our love I will go to see them – tonight! – and show them that they are wrong. (p. 276)

Although Uma is elated after the midnight tryst that the Moor's parents will accept her, for, surely 'they are not evil people', Moraes is disinherited and expelled from his parental home by his mother and father, standing 'shoulder to shoulder'. Consistent unto death to her heroic and histrionic spirituality, in which Uma had competed all along with Aurora's exhibition of libidinal ecstasy, Uma kills herself by sheer chance. Not long after, Aurora too, falls to her death 'while dancing her annual dance against the gods.' (p. 314)

Abraham, who had, in his own youthful rashness, gone through a similar ordeal as his son, henceforth laid an iron grip on his outcast son in a bid for immortality to ensure a dynasty. He did not know that his son was already preparing for death. But he had been cheated twice, once by his father who abandoned him and continued to elude him through his life, vanishing into the blue, as it

were. Not only was he a Jew who bore his mother's name, but, 'despairing of his absconded father, he found his mother's secrets out instead'.

What was in the box? – Why, the only treasure of any value: viz., the past, and the future. Also, however, emeralds. (p. 78)

As long as these were the treasures of conquest it did not matter so much as when he insisted upon knowing his family name. Flory was then compelled to disown him. Having forbidden him earlier to step beyond the demarcating line between the synagogue, herself and history on the one hand and Abraham, his rich girl, the universe, his future on the other, Flory at first tries to prevent his marriage into a Roman Catholic family. When she finally gives up and lets Abraham take his own way, her only comfort is that Aurora is not too feminine.

'At least he fell for a pushy girl,' Flory said emptily to the walls. 'I had that much influence while he was still my son.' (p. 83)

Although his decision to marry Aurora may have cost Abraham his community with his mother and tribe, what determines Abraham's estrangement from his mother's matrimonial legacy of 'purity'—which he had always sniggered at and searched for a patrimony, giving himself a bastard status because he failed to find it—is his wife's refusal to keep the bargain that he had made with his own mother. That was when he lost his beauty and became crippled for life. His beauty had proved to be his bane.

In her anger against the Moor's choice to love Uma, Aurora also reenacts her mother-in-law. With her acute sense of post-modernity and the parodic mode of history, however, she expresses it by painting her son in the nude as his medieval ancestor Sultan Boabdil, the last Moorish Emperor of Granada. Separated from his mother Queen Isabelle who is on a different panel, he is shown split between his naked body painted as a harlequin and a 'beautifully naturalistic' mirror image that looks out longingly at Uma who was cast in the form of the princess Chimene in *El Cid*. Indeed, as the dying Belle da Gama, Aurora's mother, had predicted, the unfolding tragedy would be that of ever returning Ximene/Chimenes playing the Cid.

Aurora in her maternal jealousy of her son's first true love had created this cry of pain, in which a mother's attempts to show her son the simple truth about himself were doomed to failure by a sorceress's head-turning tricks... (p. 247)

Uma Saraswati wishes to hijack Aurora's new project for a *Nude Moor* by promising him that 'Like the David with his too big hand I will make your big old club the loveliest limb in the world' (p. 246). But it is only after the death of his 'egotistical' mother that Moraes discovers that in her last work called *The Moor's Last Sigh*, she gave 'the Moor back his humanity', and he came to know for the first time how much the mother was merged in the son.

And behind him, his mother, no longer in a separate panel, but re-united with the tormented Sultan: Not berating him – well may you weep like a woman – but looking frightened and stretching out her hand. (pp. 315-316)

Overlooking his mother's frightened look, the son interprets her hand stretched out merely as 'an apology that came too late, an act of forgiveness from which I could no longer profit.' (p. 316)

The image of his mother being no longer of 'profit' to him, the picture of his Moorish ancestor and his Queen mother 'only intensified the pain of the loss'. Much later, when he moves to Benengeli, having heard that Vasco Miranda was holding his mother a prisoner there, the knowledge that his mother had tried to save him and his humanity when he banished her only increases his pity for his failed mother.

O mother, mother. I know why you banished me now. O my great dead mother, my duped progenitrix, my fool. (p. 316)

Aurora was duped because she had sent a cry for help to her rejected lover Vasco Miranda, trusting that 'no matter how badly you treat a man ... he will go on caring for you.' After the death of Aurora, Vasco's life and Abraham's had become almost the same.

In the aftermath of Aurora Zogoiby's death they both became recluses, Abraham in his high tower and Vasco in his; they both sought to bury the pain of her loss

beneath new activity, new enterprises, no matter how ill-conceived. And they both, as I would learn, claimed to have seen her ghost. (p. 328)

Under Aurora's last instruction Vasco Miranda's magic hand reveals an x-ray vision embedded in Aurora Zogoiby's last piece, which is now seen to be much more than 'her anguished declaration of a mother-love that could transcend and forgive the supposed crimes of her beloved child' (p. 415). It reveals her last fear that she might be killed at any time, and the concealed portrait of the killer himself under her work in progress. The Moor recognizes with horror that it is the picture of his father Abraham Zogoiby. Vasco Miranda, whom Aurora had trusted to transmit her dying message to her son, also forces the Moor at gunpoint to lose his humanity for the last time, before the memory of his mother's urgency to communicate her fear and indictment for her own murder passes out of his mind. If Benengeli and 'its overwhelming reality of the bombs' had wiped 'his moral slate clean', and put him in a state of 'suspended moral animation' because he was lucky to have fallen in with the only two non-smokers in town (p. 404), in the end he finds himself having coughing spasms, 'his lungs no longer doing his bidding' and his skin falling off him, dreaming 'of interlocking forms and secret wisdom', which tease him 'like a lost possibility that nevertheless has gone on standing, long after its conquerors have fallen.' (p. 433) The Moor has run, and outrun his race.

The end of this narrative is an outburst of blood – of the blood in the hands of the Moor, of Vasco Miranda, the mad, bloodthirsty artist who had loved Aurora as the Snow Queen, and of Aoi Ue, the last woman, of Japanese origin, in whom the Moor expected to see his mother brought back from the dead. But Aoi was so perfectly self-composed in her rootlessness (*'I yam what I yam an' that's what I yam*, and to the devil with roots and schmoots') that she made the Moor wonder whether the myth of the autonomous self was truer than the myth of the historical subject. Just when she is teaching the Moor to get rid of his family history of guilt and shame through lessons in self discipline, she collapses under the horror of 'the story in which she (too) was so unfairly trapped.' (pp. 426-432) With the breakdown of this last strong woman in the Moor's life, and the death of both the hunter and the hunted, he realizes that they were all but shadows of his mother who would never come back.

She, too, had gone beyond recall, and she never spoke to me, never made confession, never gave me back what I needed, the certainty of her love. (p. 432)

Between the Moor's suspicion that he could faintly recall his Mother's early sexual fondlings and the uncertainty whether his mother's unfinished painting was a gesture of forgiveness or fear, the Moor never emerged from darkness. Still thirsting for the confirmation of his mother's love, he sits down to write the end of his story.

If *The Moor's Last sigh* follows a narrative generated by Katherine Mayo that India is the centre of a worldwide saga of death, disease and bloody horrors, where the mothers are really 'the slaves of the gods', Rushdie turns the table on Mayo by making the personality of Aurora, rather than the Hindu tradition of women's oppression, the fatal determinant of the game. Also, Miss Mayo piles accusations on Hindu customs, while true to the stereotypes of her time, Indian Muslims, especially of the North Western Frontier are generally represented with admiration. Rushdie, who makes the Hindu ayah Jaya He impersonate Mayo in his novel, recasts Mayo's 'puritanical' horror as Hindu antipathy towards Muslim perversity. But Rushdie also shows how in a post-independence maternal narrative of nationalism like Mehboob Khan's film *Mother India* the traditional, idealized image of Radha as the mother nation is represented without any irony or hint of sexual excess. It only breaks down (as the Indian audience would remember) under the reality of Radha's mute motherhood that spills beyond the neat conclusion of a narrative dedicated to technological modernization. To the disobedient son who goes against the code of his mother's prescribed conduct, especially with regard to women's honour, the mother fails to extend her protection, because she is anxious that she would no longer remain the mother of the community if she did. The ideal, to put it in simple terms, is too heroic for her natural love.

This too, is being trapped in a medieval ideal, the ideal of chivalry that was scoffed at by Vivekananda and is repeated, like a refrain in *The Moor's Last Sigh* in another form. In Rushdie's novel it is the fatal attraction of the Moor for women who ask him to replay the martyrdom of Christ, the end to be attained in heaven rather than on earth. The categorical imperative to look after women's

honour, incidentally, was issued by Katherine Mayo herself, quoting, on the one hand the precept of Manu: 'Where a woman is not honoured /Vain is sacrificial rite' and on the other Gandhi's summary of it: 'What is the teaching worth, if their practice denies it?' (p. 113)

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Abraham is especially attentive that 'women-children should not suffer for the activities of their fathers' (p.333). Aurora, on the other hand, had ejected each of her daughters 'with such perfunctory attention to their presence that they knew, long before their births, that she would make few concessions to their post-partum needs.' When Nehru asks her to climb down from the heights of Elephanta when she was posing for a dance she even makes Nehru recite the poem 'The Walrus and the Carpenter' from memory and comment: 'It is a sad poem ... because the oysters are so young; a poem, one could say, about the eating of children.'

'We all eat children,' my mother rejoined. This was about ten years before I was born. 'If not other people's, then our own.' (p. 125)

If Aurora's comment is a remembrance of Radha's haunting act of killing her own son which keeps her transfixed in a moment between the past and the present, unwilling to look out on a modernizing future that gushes out like a river of blood on the innocent land, the narrator hero of Rushdie's novel 'finds it instructive' to note their similarities and differences.

In *Mother India*, a piece of Hindu myth-making directed by a Muslim socialist, Mehboob Khan, the Indian peasant woman is idealized as bride, mother, and producer of son; as long-suffering, stoical, loving, redemptive, and conservatively wedded to the maintenance of the social status quo. But for Bad Birju, cast out from his mother's love, she becomes, as one critic has mentioned, 'the image of an aggressive, treacherous, annihilating mother who haunts the fantasy life of Indian males.'

I, too, know something about this image; have been cast as a Bad Son in my turn. My mother was no Nargis Dutt – she was the in-your-face type, not serene. Catch her

hauling a shovel on her shoulder! I am pleased to say that I have never seen a spade. Aurora was a city girl, perhaps *the* city girl, as much as the incarnation of the smartyboots metropolis as Mother India was village earth made flesh. In spite of this I have found it instructive to 'compare and contrast our families. Mother India's movie husband was rendered impotent, his arms crushed by a rock; and ruined limbs play a central role in our saga, too. (You must judge for yourself whether Abraham was a potent fellow or im-.) And as for Birju and Moor: dark skins and crookery are not all we had in common (pp. 138-139).

Wading through the complicated maze of class differences, and differences in village earth/metropolitan location, not to mention the differences in their husband's potency, the two women are brought to the same level in the commonness that their sons share in their character, which is not altogether 'dark skins and crookery'. And all this pertains to the knowledge of that image, 'the image of an aggressive, treacherous, annihilating mother who haunts the fantasy life of Indian males'. It is, after all, an image constructed by male fantasy.

The irony is that by the end of the novel Aurora has already left her son an unspoken legacy which he fails to assimilate — ranged as he is on the side of human 'heroism' against 'human' perversity, as Aurora had made him believe. As mother her message is that of coming back to reclaim her son's humanity again and again. In the narrative it comes down to the moment of assassination of Aoi Ue, whose heart bleeds through Aurora's image of the bare breasted, childless virgin in which the mad Vasco had painted her years ago, but failed to win her heart. Abraham too, could never forgive Aurora, not seeing that he was a race traitor himself, 'turning his back on mother and tribe, and walking out of Jewtown into Aurora's Roman arms'. The story of Abraham's own rebellion goes back to the frantic search for the lost father that his mother would not reveal to him, and culminates in 'recalcitrant, unregenerate, paramount' power. Aurora is one more misunderstood mother in the line, whose silence is interpreted as her secrecy or cruelty. But in the sequence of paintings that she called 'The Moor in Exile', only Aurora is unwilling to forsake her son who relives his father's life as his adversary,

whether she is alive or dead, although the Moor does not see it. And it is through his imagined motherlessness that the Moor commits himself to death, as Abraham had done years ago through his imagined fatherlessness.

The Moor had entered the invisible world, the world of ghosts, of people who did not exist, and Aurora followed him into it, forcing it into visibility by the strength of her artistic will.

And the Moor-figure: alone now, motherless, he sank into immorality, and was shown as a creature of shadows, degraded in tableaux of debauchery and crime. ... Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and *mélange* which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. (p. 303)

The 'black moor' thus becomes a new imagining of the hybrid, a Baudelairean flower of evil, as it were, in his mother's paintings; and when his father takes him under his wings to create a dynasty, revealing business secrets to him, he finds an unexpected upsurge of the purity of his father's Jewish identity in 'standing up to his formidable, deadly father', who had forsaken his Jewishness. It is unexpected because he had been raised in Elephanta, 'where all communal ties had been deliberately disrupted; in a country where all citizens owe an instinctive dual allegiance to a place and a faith' he had 'been made into a nowhere-and-no-community man – and proud of it' (p. 336).

The shell of his secular nationalism thus broken after he was turned out of Elephanta, the Moor turns to condemn a murderous and deceitful civilization that he thinks was forged by his father. More than anything else it is to be loyal to his mother Aurora's memory that he took it upon himself 'to be judge, jury and executioner' all together. Sparked off by Mainduck's comment that 'when the new nation is to be born, there is much invader history that may have to be erased', the blood lust in his history explodes in commemoration of his mother. He was determined to do away with all the witchery and sleight of hand of civilization.

Civilization is the sleight of hand that conceals our natures from ourselves. My hand, gentle reader, lacked

sleight; but it knew what manner of thing it was.

So, blood-lust was in my history and it was in my bones.
I did not waver in my decision for an instant; I would
have vengeance, or die in the attempt. (pp. 364 - 365)

Twice in his life the Moor found out that he could not die for the women he loved, even when they asked him to, for the memory of his mother running through his veins was the instinct for life. Nor was he ever really able to wreak the vengeance that he thought he had inherited from his father's ancestry, because civilization had concealed his nature from himself. The only option that he has left is death, and here again, the best that he can do is to fall asleep, true to the practices of his family, in times of trouble, hoping to awaken 'renewed and joyful, into a better time.' But in this sleep under a tombstone marked R. I. P which is a 'rest, and hope for peace', the Moor is one in a 'world full of sleepers waiting for their moment of return', knowing that their resurrection is but a matter of time. He shares the same earth bed as warrior sleepers historical and mythical like Arthur and Babarossa, Finn MacCool and the Worm Ouroboros itself 'on the bed of the Sundering Sea' (pp. 433 - 434). 'And now grim and woundsome grew the battle, for the Demons mightily withstood the onset of the witches.'¹⁸ But the *Worm Ouroboros* never let the Demons exterminate the Witches in history, even if by bringing them back from the dead. The epigraph to this warrior fantasy by Eddison, with the name of which Rushdie ends the Moor's narrative in his novel, is really about the mistaken identity of the Lady that was sent down from the heaven to True Thomas in a dream, only to breathe life into the mouth of her sleeping son, so that thereby she might claim his body. That identity discovered, the Serpent, which is Ouroboros too, shall not eat its tail anymore.

TRUE Thomas lay on Huntlie bank,

A ferlie he spied wi his ee;

And there he saw a Lady bright

Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.

Her skirt was o the grass-green silk,

Her mantle o the velvet fyne,

At ilka tett of her horse's mane

Hung fifty siller bells and nine.
 And louted low down on his knee:
 "Hall to thee, Mary, Queen of Heaven!
 For thy peer on earth could never be."
 "O no, O no, Thomas," she says,
 "That name does not belong to me;
 I'm but the Queen of fair Elfland,
 That am hither come to visit thee.
 "Harp and carp, Thomas," she says,
 "Harp and carp alang wi me.
 And if ye dare to kiss my lips,
 Sure of your bodie I will be."
 "Betide me weal, betide me woe,
 That weird shall never daunt me."
 Syne he has kissed her rosy lips,
 All underneath the Eildon Tree.

THOMAS THE RHYMER

1. A postcolonial perspective like Rushdie's in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, however, is a reminder that the beauty of motherhood is vulnerable to the ugliness of life and death.

2. Benedict Anderson, Introduction to *Imagined Communities*, p. 13.

The aim of this book is to offer some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory interpretation of the 'anomaly' of nationalism. My sense is that on this topic both Marxist and liberal theory have become etiolated in a late Ptolemaic effort to 'save the phenomena'; and that a reorientation of perspective in, as it were, a Copernican spirit, is urgently required.

3. Ibid, p.19. Anderson points this out in the context of emphasizing the spirit of 'rationalist secularism' in the age of Enlightenment, which 'marks not only the dawn of nationalism, but the dusk of religious modes of thought.'

4. This and other page references to this novel are from Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (Canada, Alfred A Knopf, 1995).

5. All subsequent page references are to Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1927).

6. 'Neither do I wish to imply that some of the most unflattering things here affirmed of India are without counterpart in character and tendency, if not in degree, in certain sections of our western life. But India has carried the principle of egocentricity and of a materialism called spirituality to a further and wider conclusion than has the west. The results, in the individual, the family and the race, are only the more noteworthy. For they cast a spotlight towards the end of that road.' (p. 363).

7. K de B Codrington, Review of *Mother India* by Katherine Mayo and *The Education of India* by Arthur Mayhew, *The Monthly Criterion*, Vol. VI, No VI, December 1927, reprinted in *The Monthly Criterion: A Literary Review* (London, Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 563.

8. See the chapter called 'The World Menace' in Mayo's book pp. 325-336. According to Mayo, cholera was introduced from India to the USA in 1893 and plague from China to India in 1896.

9. See Mrinalini Sinha, 'Reading Mother India: Empire, Nation and the Female Voice', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (SUMMER), 1994, p. 11. The references are to the chapter entitled 'Behind the Veil' in Mayo's book, and the word *hijab* stands for veil in Islamic culture. Mayo, of course, took special care in the second edition of her book to attribute to Hindu India in particular her charges of sexual exaggeration.

10. 'By all means take care of [the girl's body]; but fail not to train her morals, to train her soul, so as to enable her to look upon her husband as her God, which indeed is the case in India, among Hindus at least ... Don't destroy, I beg of you – don't ruin our Hindu Homes' (p. 43).

11. The titles of the books by Miss Amy Wilson-Carmichael which Mayo quotes in the footnote are *Lotus Buds* and *Things as they Are* (p. 53, fn 2). The opinion of Miss Carmichael is that 'You cannot hustle the East', to which Mayo replies 'But the underground teachings of western standards and western contacts, and the steady, quiet teachings of the British official through the years have done more, perhaps, toward ultimate change than any coercion could have effected.' (p. 53)

12. While the Indian mother as daughter of Dawn (Usha) was to be recognized in her outward "details of 'Shankha' bracelet, and close veiling garment, of bare feet and open, sincere expression", as 'the Spirit of the Motherland', she was a 'giver of all good, yet eternally virgin' and raft 'from the human sense in prayer and gift'. It set her apart from the common world as much as her Mother Goddess image, perpetually mythologized as a four armed goddess with infinite love, and raised above the human context.

13. See Mahatma Gandhi's article on Katherine Mayo in *Young India*, September 15, 1927, cited in K. Natarajan, *Miss Mayo's Mother India: A Rejoinder* (Madras, G.A. Natesan and Company, 1928), p. 106.

14. Sinha, 'Reading Mother India', p. 25.

15. M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, 1927, Pages xiii, xiv. <http://www.gandhilibrary.org/default.asp>

But for me, truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle that is God. There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him.

16. Katherine Mayo to J. H. Adams, cited in Sinha, *Reading Mother India*, p. 10. Mayo had written, 'If I write a general book, and a couple of chapters on this, it makes escape from the point more possible. Shall I make this just a complete bomb, self-contained and exclusive?' The 'this' that Mayo refers to twice as a 'complete bomb' is evidently intended to make 'escape from the point more possible.'

17. Mayo, cited in Sinha, 'Reading Mother India' pp. 10 -11.

18. See E. R. Eddison, *The Worm Ouroboros*, Copyright: 2003 by Litrix Reading Room, <http://www.litrix.com/wormo/wormo001.htm>

A Class Apart: A Reading of Two 'Karachi' Novels by Kamila Shamsie

Sayantana Dasgupta

Colonialism, it has been argued, was fuelled by the transformation of the would-be colonising powers into mass-producers, buyers and then, sellers.¹ It entailed "forcefully altering the subjugated societies in order that they might become more profitable adjuncts of the centres of capitalism"² but it also entailed the activation of "local elite strata that would benefit from cooperation with the foreign rulers".³ Colonialism thus aimed at "creating a new class structure, including fostering of new elite groups as political and junior partners of the imperial powers".⁴ One of the most pressing concerns of Kamila Shamsie's novels is to highlight how this class of collaborators would retain its privileged position even after political independence in Pakistan. This paper explores how Shamsie, Pakistan-born English-language writer who lives in London and Karachi, textualises themes of class alienation, economic disparity and power hierarchies in her Karachi novels, *In the City by the Sea* and *Kartography*.⁵

Developing countries in general, and post-colonial Pakistani society in particular, have been characterized by a wide discrepancy between growth and distribution. "Development of the type experienced by the majority of Third World countries in the last quarter century has meant, for very large numbers of people, increased impoverishment".⁶ The increased hardships of the poor have been mirrored by a disproportionate concentration of wealth in the hands of a select few. Kamila Shamsie's works highlight this disjunction and can be read as a critique of the same.

The contemporary English-language novel from Pakistan seems, in general, to be more overtly concerned with class inequalities than its Indian or Sri Lankan versions have been.⁷ Kamila Shamsie, Talat Abbasi,⁸ Uzma Aslam Khan⁹ and Mohsin Hamid¹⁰ have all highlighted the disproportionate gap in the lives of the rich and the poor in Pakistani society. Perhaps this becomes such a relevant preoccupation for these writers because the distribution of resources has been most monstrously unequal in post-independence Pakistan.

This massive inequality can be traced to the Ayub Khan era when developmentalist policies framed by US experts privileged growth over distribution. Quickfire economic growth in that period fuelled regional and class inequalities, impoverished thousands and engendered a monopoly of wealth by a privileged few. The 'Big Twenty-two' families¹¹ were symptomatic of the monstrous inequalities in Pakistani society. The massive defence expenditure, which leaves only a "small proportion of annual budgetary allocations for the social sector...has left the majority of the people illiterate, without basic health and sanitation facilities"¹² and has not helped bridge the gap. One may argue that it is precisely because this inequality is so palpable¹³ in Pakistan, where a 'middle class' is virtually non-existent, that these writers highlight this disjunction between rich and poor in Pakistan, even when they belong to the privileged class themselves.

Kamila Shamsie's well-off Karachi characters have their class identity and their alienation from the rest of Pakistani society stamped all over them. The protagonists of *In the City by the Sea* converse almost entirely in English (the author signposts the rare occasion when Hasan addresses the servants: "I'm Hasan", Hasan said in Urdu, advancing into the kitchen").¹⁴ What is true of Hasan is also true of Zia in *Kartography*—he uses Urdu only for the benefit of the guard at Sonia's house.¹⁵

Again, when Hasan reads Urdu verse,¹⁶ he has to translate it into English to understand it. Significantly, we see similar manifestations of the colonial-imperialist process in various parts of the world. Ngugi could have been thinking about Hasan when he wrote:

The language of an African child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. *The language of his conceptualisation was foreign.* Thought, in him, took the visible form of a foreign language...This resulted in the disassociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation.¹⁷ (emphasis mine)

This African child would probably be in the same position of having to translate from her/his own language into English before s/

he could understand what was written in the original language. Ngugi's 'colonial alienation' appears to linger in postcolonial Pakistan.

One also notes that while the narrator of *In the City by the Sea* refers to upper-class characters as Salman 'Mamoo' and Gul 'Mumani', Khalida is simply 'Khalida', and Khan, 'Khan', Mansoor, at best, 'Mansoor-with-long-thumbail'.¹⁸ Similarly, while Asif is 'Uncle Asif' to Raheen,¹⁹ the driver is simply 'Altaf'.²⁰ Keeping in mind the fact that Altaf, Dost Mohammed, Khan, Mansoor and Khalida are all older than Raheen/ Hasan, we can identify in this language use, further indicators of the class position of these characters as well as their location vis-à-vis the process of cultural imperialism. Tariq Rahman has stressed the importance of kinship terms (KTs) in forms of address used by traditional Pakistani society. He enumerates words like 'uncle', 'aunty', 'bhabhi', 'masi', 'mai' and 'chacha' and writes: "All the indigenous KT's given above are generally used by children for servants".²¹ Many of the kinship terms, however, are fast becoming unfashionable in elite Pakistani society, he writes, as he connects this trend with a hegemony of Western norms, which, in his view, are destroying traditional Pakistani notions of politeness.

The characters in *In the City by the Sea* spend hours debating the etymology of English words and reciting Shakespearean sonnets translated into Latin and discussing Greek mythology;²² the education the younger members of the cast receive, too, is largely predicated upon English language, literature and culture. In *Kartography*, the children mostly listen to Wham!,²³ Bruce Springsteen,²⁴ Boney M²⁵ (with the odd reference to Faiz thrown in).²⁶ This, then, is the first fracture that we notice in the national fabric, the first symptom of class alienation—along the axis of language. The puns that Shamsie's characters devise and the etymological exercises they indulge in are incomprehensible to most Pakistanis, whose access to English is limited. Note the anagrams devised by Raheen and Karim in *Kartography* for instance; the exercise in which Raheen remembers dismantling and reassembling 'the road leading to the airport' into "the road leading to the oar trip; the road leading to the rapt roi; O I dare thee, old gnat, hit parrot; pin the aorta or glide to death"²⁷ lacks relevance to the lives of all but a select few in Pakistan.

Shamsie's characters are people who own a "BMW, Nissan Patrol and (for the servants' use) Honda Civic".²⁸ They live in houses with bukhara rugs and Mughal miniatures.²⁹ They are also those

who live sheltered lives, isolated from the everyday problems, separated by "high, high boundary walls which, mountain-like, cut off the outside world".³⁰ Even as the City is racked apart by riots, the upper-class members of the City continue to live their sheltered lives—it takes months for the riots outside to reach the "elite enclaves"³¹ of the City. In fact, so sheltered are the lives of Hasan and Zehra that it is only through the Bodyguard that they learn that "nearly a hundred people were killed in the riots yesterday, in the City alone".³² Even violence respects the walls erected by class privilege; the ayah tells Aliya of her neighbourhood: "it's a poor part of town, not like this—at least one person per family is killed in police custody",³³ and Khan says, "Wealth changes everything",³⁴ while explaining why his brother-in-law was picked up by the police while more well-to-do supporters of Salman Mamoo were not. Thus, as Umber Khairi writes, the dissenting politician, Salman, escapes unharmed as befits a person of his class while his poor supporters die in the clashes. These poor victims are "the dispensable workers, the people who fight and die while leaders like Salman Haq discuss etymology and cricket in their drawing rooms".³⁵

The protagonists' interaction with characters from outside their own circle in *In the City by the Sea* is extremely limited, perhaps because most of the action takes place indoors. Still, in the little we see of people from outside this class, the inequality is brought out in stark relief. We notice, for example: "The new cook—Atif? Asif? Arif?—brought three cups of tea and a box of wheat biscuits into the TV room."³⁶ The child-narrator, by virtue of his class position, does not even bother to remember the name of the cook. The similarity with the incident in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, where Cunningham does not deign to use Laakhan-Lutchman's name ("Since the man was a menial employee Farley was not surprised that Cunningham had not taken the trouble to tell him his name"³⁷) because he is after all, a menial worker, is striking.

Our reading of Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea*, thus, contradicts Fawzia Afzal-Khan's contention that "the problem with Pakistan, as viewed by this young author, is not the poverty or the gap between rich and poor, or even the corruption of the elites; rather, it resides in the suppression of democracy by successive

military regimes".³⁸ Class disjunctions within Pakistani society does figure as an important concern for Shamsie—her repeated references to these outsized disjunctions add up to a scathing critique of them.

Hasan's encounter with the two ragpickers is significant in this context. When Hasan sees the ragpickers, he rolls down the car window and flings out his mathematics book. On being scolded, he says: "You wouldn't understand. Only Salman Mamoo would."³⁹ Hasan thus associates his attempt to break out of the isolation his class identity has condemned him to, with Salman Mamoo, his politician uncle. Throughout the novel, Salman is portrayed as Hasan's idol; he is the darling of the masses and is contrasted with the military dictator. Salman Mamoo, in a way, represents the alternative to an oppressive military regime and the democratic aspirations of the City. Yet this is a problematic reading; with his passion for debating etymology of English words, his isolated existence and his bukhara rugs and Mughal miniatures, which Pakistan does he represent? We do witness expressions of popular support for him, but we hardly see him interact with the people whom he would represent as a democratically elected leader. Even this support is never concretised in the form of sustained characters with any substantial role in the narrative. Perhaps it is possible to read in the unspecified and unconcretised support of the people for Salman Mamoo, also, an indicator of how little the common people of Pakistan have mattered to politicians.⁴⁰ Yet that reading does seem to contradict the position that is accorded to Salman Mamoo throughout the novel—he is apparently the wronged darling of the people who has been put under house arrest and whom the dictator will kill after procuring the silence of foreign powers by sacrificing national interests. The problem with this portrayal is that it is difficult to imagine Salman Mamoo's actions being anything radically different from the dictator's mode of functioning if he came to power. With his near-complete isolation from the masses (admittedly compounded by the house arrest in recent times) and his lack of contact with the poverty and illiteracy outside the house in which he argues over etymology, it is difficult to accept him as a serious alternative. It is no coincidence then that towards the end of the novel, Shamsie posits the Widow, a

grassroots worker, and not Salman as the one who would change Pakistan.

The claims of democracy are further problematised when Aba reveals the status quoist stance of his class: "I admire the struggle but there are certain prices I cannot pay to assist it...I would rather live under a dictator and have Salman safe at home, than achieve democracy through his imprisonment."⁴¹ In the conflict between communal good and individual security, Shamsie's characters, used to the security their class identity affords them, choose the latter—this is a class easily tempted by softer options and not very open to the idea of personal suffering for the sake of one's convictions. Umber Khairi has aptly summed up Kamila Shamsie's *City* characters as "charming people with their wit, their ability to quote from texts both eastern and western and their parlour conversation; but they are also guilty of compromise, guilty of social apathy and guilty of trying to preserve this status quo in terms of class and privilege".⁴²

Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* ventures out further from the class confines within which the narrative of *In the City by the Sea* had restricted itself. In the early part of the novel, it seems as if the context of *Kartography* is very much the context captured in *In the City by the Sea*. The elitism of the characters manifests itself in the way the riot is only fodder for drawing room conversations and the way Aba drapes himself on the sofa with "the indolence of a well-satisfied man"⁴³ even as riots ravage the city. The characters are rich, smug and untouched by the happenings outside except having to think twice before letting them drive to the beach. They sit smug in the enlightenment their privileged education and economic clout have given them and rue the ignorance of the less privileged: "When will this country learn?"⁴⁴ Aunt Maheen asks.

The protagonists of *Kartography* also have the privilege of mobility. At various junctures in the novel, Ali, Karim, Zia, Maheen and Zafar all consider the option of emigrating from Karachi. Some of them do move on and some do not, but the point is that this is a class that enjoys the option of leaving when, for so many others, the only option is to stay on and face the culture of the gun, drugs,

ethnic violence and state repression that has come to characterise Karachi. This choice becomes an operative category for defining as well as understanding one's relationship to the nation.

If the protagonists of *In the City by the Sea* have *bukhara* rugs and Mughal miniatures decorating their houses, the characters of *Kartography* can afford solid gold taps in their bathroom⁴⁵ and four family cars.⁴⁶ When Zia, Karim and Raheen are stuck in Mehmoodabad, they are easily identifiable as 'Burgers', the English-speaking elite from the posh Defence area of Karachi. The stark difference between a dingy and violence-prone place like Mehmoodabad and their neighbourhood gives Raheen a sense of relief that she "had been born 'on this side of Clifton Bridge' where class bound everyone together in an enveloping, suffocating embrace, with ethnicity only a secondary or even tertiary concern".⁴⁷ For Raheen, the Mehmoodabad experience opens her eyes to the difference between Karachi as she knows it and Karachi as most Karachiites know it:

Houses! To me the word conjured up structures surrounded by gardens and surrounded further by boundary walls,⁴⁸ but here you could look down the streets and see rectangular double-storeyed buildings squashed together—or was it one building, one which changed colour here and there? —with doors and windows at regular intervals, each set of doors marking the entry to a house.⁴⁹

Yet, even at this stage, mid-way into the novel, Raheen cannot let go of her class interests; she is happy in her sense of security and cannot bother herself with what is happening to the rest of Karachi outside her partying Defence circle.

The textualisation of the disparity in housing privileges in Karachi correspond to development studies carried out by several social scientists. According to studies, Karachi's per capita income works out substantially higher than the national figure and only 15 per cent of Karachi households live below the 'poverty line'. Yet, "there is undoubtedly a significant amount of poverty in the city. This is *visually manifested* in the mushroom growth of unserviced katchi abadis, which now account for almost 40 per cent of the city's

population."⁵⁰ Thus, S Akbar Zaidi writes: "while only 15 per cent of Karachi's population is below a poverty line, the 50 per cent that live in *katchi abadis* are also classified as poor".⁵¹ But there is yet another dimension involved to the politics of poverty in Karachi. "While *katchi abadis* are used as a proxy for urban poverty, so is the concept of the informal, or unregulated, private sector. Often the contrast between planned and unplanned urban settlements is used to 'visually manifest' the extent of poverty in a city."⁵² Karachi's unplanned areas mainly comprise *katchi abadis* and squatter settlements, and most of them have been developed illegally by informal sector entrepreneurs. As a result, while planned areas have 80 per cent of permanent housing structures of Karachi and unplanned areas have 20 per cent, almost 80 per cent of semi-permanent housing structures are to be found in unplanned areas. While the number of persons occupying per room works out to an average of 0.5 in planned areas, the corresponding figure for unplanned areas is 3.3. The figures for water connections in unplanned areas works out to 50 per cent, for gas connections, 35.1 per cent, and for access to sewage facilities, a mere 12 per cent; corresponding figures for planned areas are 83 per cent, 75.3 per cent and 85 per cent.⁵³

Mehmoodabad in *Kartography* mutates into Liaquatabad in *Salt and Saffron* to highlight the divisions and discrepancies that characterise the many Karachis that exist simultaneously. The moment Samia hears Khaleel is from Liaquatabad, she yanks Aliya off the train and walks away.⁵⁴ She finds the idea of exchanging telephone numbers with someone from Liaquatabad quite preposterous. Samia's response highlights "the rigid class distinctions in Pakistan between the older elite and the others".⁵⁵ Aliya later explains to Khaleel about the "great class divide of Pakistan",⁵⁶ but Liaquatabad is uncharted territory for her. Like Raheen, she, too, leads a sheltered life and can only imagine what Liaquatabad, or the other, Karachi, is like:

I tried to picture him in Liaquatabad, but I had no idea what Liaquatabad looked like, so I just imagined tiny storefronts

and burst sewerage pipes and cramped flats with laundry hanging over their balconies, spattered with crow droppings...⁵⁷

It is only much later that Aliya questions her conception of the neat division of Karachi into privileged and deprived spaces. Deprivation and poverty cohabits with affluence and class in Karachi; it is only a matter of looking closely, she realises. Thus she understands that :

...affluence and lack sat cheek by jowl in Karachi. Between the large old houses near Mohatta Palace and the smaller, modern houses on Khayaban-e-Shujaat, which displayed their wealth in accessories rather than in size, was a shortcut that took you past streets where shiny cars and designer *shalwar-kameezes* and English-speaking voices all but disappeared, replaced by tiny storefronts, narrow streets crowded with people and cycles and the occasional goat, children selling vegetables or fixing tyres or chasing each other along the roads without pavements.⁵⁸

The elite of Karachi in *Kartography* are tied together by a common divorce, if not apathy, from what is happening outside their well-protected neighbourhoods. We note Raheen's narratorial comment about Naila, the maalishwari: "Naila was our yardstick for measuring the severity of violence in the city on Saturdays".⁵⁹ Thus the riots outside the high boundary walls of the Defence residential area work their way into the discourse of the Karachi elite only indirectly, sheltered as they are by virtue of their class identity. Naila serves as a link between this isolated world and the world outside—she is, for many, not so much a person as an object whose punctuality and absences will give them a peek at the realities of the world outside. The places where the riots are taking place are just unfamiliar names to these characters—and Karim repeatedly pulls Raheen up for this, reminding her of how small a circle she lives her life in. It is Raheen and Zia's experience in Kharadar and later in the hospital that acquaint them little by little with the Karachis they have remained blind to.

Raheen, in fact, undergoes a process of development in the novel. While she shares the characteristics of the Karachi elite we have been discussing, she gradually enlarges her circles of activity

and finds one day that she "can no longer say to the world, *there's nothing I can do to change this, so why think too hard about it?*"⁶⁰

The smugness of the Karachi elite in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* is not, then, an unfractured one. Their alienation is critiqued not merely by the narrator's repeated references to it but also, on several occasions, by many of the characters themselves. We note, for instance, Ali wondering aloud: "What am I more afraid of: that one day my son will get caught up in the troubles, or that he'll never get caught up in it at all?"⁶¹ There is fear that it is only a matter of time before the walls that protect his family collapse. But there is also a feeling of guilt for the security his class position provides to his family. Hasan can never be an organic part of the chaos and the turbulent attempt to bring in change that characterises contemporary Pakistan. This indicates a certain ambiguity that characterises the alienation of upper-class Karachiites in contemporary Pakistan as constructed in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*—an ambiguity that characterises South Asian national imaginaries.

Again, when Ali declares that the trouble in Karachi has arisen because the repressive government wants to divide the masses, Maheen responds thus:

You choose to believe that all the trouble is artificially created, don't you, Ali?...That makes things much easier for all of us in our civilised drawing rooms, doesn't it, because then it's only about the government, or the intelligence agencies, or even the Hidden Palm...⁶²

This statement critiques the assumptions of the class the speaker herself belongs to. This recognition of one's class limitations, of the little circles one is restricted to because of one's class identity in Karachi is mirrored in several places across the novel, particularly in the dialectics between Karim's accusations and Raheen's attempts to negotiate them.

Kamila Shamsie also inscribes moments of crisis when hierarchies of class are challenged, even demolished, by other forces, one such force being a burgeoning consciousness of ethnicity/ nationalism. Thus, in the incident concerning Maheen and the beggar woman in the 1971 narrative, the beggar transgresses expected class roles and hierarchies by spitting on Maheen,⁶³ a

Bengali, whom she sees as an outsider and a traitor. This incident, along with the resentment Zafar, while engaged to Maheen in 1971, faces from his friends, successfully add up to a critique of the irrational and uncritical allegiance the discourse of nationalism demands.

Notes and References :

1. Harry Magdoff, "Imperialism: A Historical Survey", in *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, Hamza Alavi and Teodor Shanin eds. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), pp. 11-12.

2. Magdoff, "Imperialism: A Historical Survey" in *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, p. 12.

3. Ibid. p. 12.

4. Ibid. p. 18.

5. Kamila Shamsie has published four novels so far—*In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2002) and the just published *Broken Verses* (2005). *In the City by the Sea* never names the city, but the context makes it evident that the narrative is set in Karachi.

6. Keith Griffin and Azizur Rahman Khan, "Poverty in the Third World: Ugly Facts and Fancy Models" in *Introduction to the Sociology of "Developing Societies"*, p. 236.

7. "The disjunction between rich and poor in Pakistan has been a favourite theme for contemporary English-language writers from Pakistan."—I have discussed this at some length elsewhere; please see Sayantan Dasgupta, "Duplicity and Betrayal", in *The Statesman* (Literary), 31 June 2002, and "From Across the Border", *The New*

Sunday Express (Books & Literature), (Chennai: 1 July, 2001).

8. Talat Abbasi, *Bitter Gourd and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

9. See Uzma Aslam Khan, *The Story of Noble Rot* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2001).

10. See Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2000).

11. The 'Big Twenty-two', a select group of 22 families that controlled 66 per cent of all industrial assets, 70 per cent of insurance funds and 80 per cent of bank assets in Pakistan by 1968, symptomised the unequal distribution of wealth in Pakistan. See Mahbubul Haque in *Business Recorder* (Karachi: 25 April 1968), p.1, quoted in Veena Kukreja, *Contemporary Pakistan: Political Processes, Conflicts and Crises* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), p. 91.

12. Imran Ali and Soofia Mumtaz, "Preface: Understanding Pakistan—The Impact of Global, Regional, National and Local Interactions" in *Pakistan: The Contours of State and Society*, eds. Soofia Mumtaz, Jean-Luc Racine and Imran Anwar Ali (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. xxiii.

13. Gilbert Etienne's article shows just how easy it is to miss this inequality. She talks of the signs of wealth in Pakistan, not considering that the wealth of a few could mask the poverty of many and that, indeed, the more visibly wealthy one class of society appears to be, the harder we need to look for poverty rendered invisible by such a visibility of wealth, and the more monstrous the discrepancies between the wealthy and the not-wealthy are likely to be.

She writes: "The (posh urban colonies) in New Delhi are less affluent than the ones in Karachi or Islamabad. In proportion, cars are more numerous in Pakistan...Semi-durable goods, televisions, refrigerators, and other consumer goods like cold drinks are more prominent in Pakistan, not only in towns but also in rural areas." Quoted from Etienne, "The Economy of Pakistan, the Present and the Future: the Most Dangerous Years" in *Pakistan: The Contours*

of *State and Society*, p. 200.

14. Kamila Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1998), p. 4.

15. Shamsie, *Kartography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 145.

16. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 112.

17. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (London: Heinemann, 1986), p. 17.

18. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 105.

19. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 24.

20. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 90.

21. Rahman, "Cultural Invasion and Linguistic Politeness among English-using Pakistanis", in *Language, Education and Culture*, p. 201.

22. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 24.

23. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 33.

24. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 85.

25. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 137.

26. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 141.

27. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 65.

28. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 9.

29. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 75.

30. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 31.

31. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 57.

32. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 111.

33. Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron*, p. 210.

34. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 108.

35. Umber Khairi, "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie in a City like Karachi", in *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing*

Abroad (Toronto: TSAR, Fall 1999), p. 113.

36. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 66.

37. Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal and Permanent Black, 2000), pp. 119-120.

38. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, "World Literature in Review: Pakistan", in *World Literature Today*, Volume 73 Issue 4 (Autumn 1999), p.827, EBSCO Academic Search Premier database on 26 March 2004.

39. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 39.

40. Tehmina Durrani's dedication to her autobiographical *My Feudal Lord* is significant in this respect. She writes: "To the people of Pakistan, who have repeatedly trusted and supported their leaders—leaders who have, in return, used the hungry, oppressed, miserable multitudes to further their personal interests. I want the people of my country to know the truth behind the rhetoric, so that they might learn to look beyond the façade..."

Quoted from Tehmina Durrani, with William and Marilyn Hoffer, *My Feudal Lord*, (London: Corgi Books, 1995).

41. Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea*, p. 90.

42. Khairi, "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie in a City like Karachi", in *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*, p. 113.

43. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 6.

44. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 9.

45. Sonia's father takes on the appellation, 'GoldTaps', because of this; see Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 219.

46. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 200.

47. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 175.

48. We are immediately reminded of the high boundary walls that separate Hasan's world from the rest of the City in *In the City by the Sea*.

49. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 165.

50. *Metropolitan Resource Generation Study*, Volume 1, p.27, as quoted in S Akbar Zaidi, "Institutions, Poverty, Politics: The Case

of Karachi", in *Pakistan Perspectives*, Volume II, Number 2, p. 48.

51. Zaidi, "Institutions, Poverty, Politics: The Case of Karachi", in *Pakistan Perspectives*, Volume II Number 2, p. 48.

52. Zaidi, "Institutions, Poverty, Politics: The Case of Karachi", in *Pakistan Perspectives*, Volume II Number 2, p. 48.

53. Arif Hasan and Asiya Sadiq, *Mapping City Inequality: A Case of Karachi*, Report prepared for the International Institute for Environment and Development, London, 1994, quoted in Zaidi, "Institutions, Poverty, Politics: The Case of Karachi", in *Pakistan Perspectives*, Volume II Number 2, p. 49.

54. Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron*, p. 30.

55. Bruce King, "Salt and Saffron" (review of *Salt and Saffron*), in *World Literature Today* Volume 74 Issue 3 (Summer 2000), pp.588-589, downloaded from EBSCO Academic Search Premier database on 26 March 2004.

56. Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron*, p. 60.

57. Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron*, p. 51.

58. Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron*, p. 196.

59. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 197.

60. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 317.

61. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 6.

62. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 10.

63. Shamsie, *Kartography*, p. 188.

'Where can a girl travel to?'

A Modern Therigatha*

Sanjukta Das

A little girl called Tsomo asks, "Where is the furthest I can travel to mother?" Her mother replies, "Where? I don't know. Where can a girl travel to?"

'The first novel by a woman to come out of the mountain kingdom of Bhutan, *The Circle of Karma* written in English ...' says the blurb on the back cover¹. The front cover shows a close-up of the head and shoulders of a Buddha idol, gleaming golden, against an ornate backdrop. With such a title and cover one could pass by this novel at a store as yet another opulent book of oriental exotica. On reading, it has turned out to be the finest 'new writing' in some time.

The story, set in the nineteen sixties, traces the journey of Tsomo from her home in a remote mountain village in Bhutan to several places in India besides Nepal. But the geographical journey is only one of the paths she travels. At the personal level, Tsomo the eldest of several siblings, travels onwards from childhood, early loss of her mother, keeping house for her father and a stepmother who is her own age, youth, pilgrimage, love, marriage, pregnancy, miscarriage, betrayal, losing her husband to her younger sister, being ousted from her parental home, descending into the plains of Siliguri after life as a labourer on the highway construction project of the Indian government, wandering as a pilgrim to Bodhgaya and then to Kathmandu, a second 'marriage' of sorts to a man who for many years gambles away the money she makes by weaving, her earnest devotion and quest for the Rimpoché across the Himalayan settlements of Dehradun and Mussourie, moving to Delhi, and then back to Kalimpong. The narrative traces her life, her friendships with other women, her few worldly goods, the many good people she meets on the way, men and women, householders, monks, and nuns, the pathetic single outburst of anger when her second husband deserts her for a younger woman, her new life as a single woman, the changes in her body as she ages, the swollen stomach she

carries all her life since her one and only miscarried pregnancy, her 'operation' and release from the illness, her years as a destitute living on dole, her becoming a Buddhist nun, her swollen feet, her meeting after forty years with her siblings, nieces, nephews, grandchildren and her first husband now the elderly patriarch in her old parental home, her reluctance to return home, and finally one day, her death, in some unknown place in India far away from familiar persons, not directly presented but sensed by her friend in an epiphany that beatifies Tsomo in a human, spiritual and, a Female² way.

The crowded, eventful life of this lonely woman is a strange female odyssey. And yet, not so strange really, if one pauses to consider that this is the trajectory of thousands of women the world over — a trajectory that rarely impinges upon our awareness even as we study 'migrants', 'diasporas', 'others' and 'women' in fictive worlds with the tools of modern theory. The elderly beggar women asking for coins at traffic intersections, at temples, on the streets, the hordes of women who travel from far off places to work as maids in middleclass homes, homeless women cast off by their families, in Navadwip and Varanasi — they are all around us but invisible. Tsomo's story makes us aware of the epic lives that remain unknown as these women travel their lonely roads.

As an illiterate woman who cannot think of her condition in any term but the emotional, Tsomo's journey through life nevertheless attains, what one in English Studies is trained to call, 'transcendence', 'heroism' or 'epic stature', as Tsomo struggles, like an initiate monk, between the divergent pulls of the material and the spiritual. Neither formally part of the *sangha*, nor trained in the scriptures, she attains freedom by taking to the open road. Yet Tsomo's lifelong journey differs from other such journeys by women, because of her innocence, simplicity, worldview, her economic struggle and her unlettered ignorance. Thus though one might be tempted to make a comparison with other narratives by women living alone, for instance, 'Song' by Adrienne Rich —



You're wondering if I'm lonely:

OK then, yes, I'm lonely

as a plane rides lonely and level

on its radio beam, aiming

across the Rockies
 for the blue-strung aisles
 of an airfield on the ocean.
 You want to ask, am I lonely?
 Well, of course, lonely
 as a woman driving across country
 day after day, leaving behind
 mile after mile
 little towns she might have stopped
 and lived and died in, lonely...

— it is the contrast to solitary journeys by women who can write, rather than the similarity, that is striking about Tsomo's journey. Tsomo though lonely and single is in a sense saved from the solitude of the literate. Like the persona in 'Song', Tsomo does tell her story, but not on paper, not alone by herself, but to another human being, another woman, her friend, Lham Yeshe. Tsomo's journey and her life therefore seems to be bequeathed through a female tradition, mouth to mouth, through 'telling', through the oral narrative which is women's tradition and the tradition of the poor and unlettered. And Lham Yeshe listens to her friend's life as though watching a river.

The author Kunzang Choden keeps her own tone simple and aligned to factual narrative in a 'reporting' style. This gives credence to Tsomo's story and appeals to the reader with its simplicity. The author herself inhabits both worlds — Tsomo's world because, Kunzang Choden herself is a Bhutanese woman from an interior village in the mountains, and the world of her English-fiction reading readers, as well as the world of academia in which the present review is located³.

Women form the majority of the modern world's travellers if we extend the term 'traveller' to mean not just tourists and pilgrims, but migrant women workers, trafficked women, refugees from natural disasters and man-made 'development', and destitute women thrown out of families. Tsomo's journey in many ways resembles their journeys. And Tsomo's journey also weaves into its route the journeys of countless other women— fellow labourers on the road building site, fellow pilgrims, fellow destitutes. Through this simple linear narrative of Tsomo's travel the author successfully presents a wide

sweep of social and geographical spaces. These spaces are marked by their public and makeshift character — open fields to sleep in, a hut on the road construction site, people's homes for a night, cheap hotels, free lodgings or *dharmashalas*, rented huts, temporary lodgings as a pilgrim, an abandoned room offered by the Rimpoche who is himself homeless and a refugee from Tibet, a room in the monastery at Delhi, and finally a hut on municipal land. Once out of her parental home, Tsomo inhabits these spaces throughout her life. This subverts the boundaries of home and world as the world becomes her home. The Buddhist religion with its rituals and pilgrimages, offers Tsomo a thin veil of respectability as she leaves home and takes to the open road. That she has been hounded out of this home is something she is ashamed of in the beginning.

The first time she leaves home is to light butter lamps for her dead mother. She travels alone, meets with some pilgrims on the way and they sleep out in the open, travelling together to the shrine at Trongsa. It is during this trip that Tsomo meets Wangchen who later comes to her house when she is three months pregnant with his child, and marries her. Tsomo miscarries. Wangchen who lives in her house according to matrilineal custom falls in love with Tsomo's younger sister. When Tsomo protests she is beaten up again and again. Wangchen wants her to sign away her right to the house that she has been bequeathed as the eldest daughter. Her father expects her to reconcile to the situation, as does Wangchen. Finally left with no choice Tsomo flees. The story of her inheritance of the house in which she grew up, and which was built by her mother's great-grandfather, the brute force by which this property is taken away from her despite a document, is a telling comment upon the travesty that women's-right-to-property often is.

Daughter of a Buddhist priest, Tsomo had wanted to learn reading and writing. At home she secretly watches her father tutor young boys. The second chapter of the novel, 'We are Different' begins with a riddle:

'There is a long thin bird that is rather peculiar. It flies down to the valley and drinks from a round lake, then it flies back to a cave and rests awhile before it comes down to a big open field and dances endlessly. What is it?' asks one of the older boys, cockily confident.

Everybody tries to guess but nobody has the correct answer...

Tsomo knows the answer to the riddle. She puts her hand over her mouth to stop herself from speaking out. She does not want anyone to discover her in her hiding place.

'...I am sure I have won', proclaims the older boy triumphantly before he goes to explain the riddle. 'It is a pen. Look here'. Taking the pen in his hand he began to demonstrate, 'The long thin bird is the bamboo pen. It drinks from the lake when it is dipped into the inkpot. The cave is the mouth and the writer puts the pen in the mouth when he pauses between writing, like this. And then, when he begins to write on the paper it's like the bird dancing in the open field.'⁴

Tsomo regularly watches the boys at their lessons from her hiding place and picks up the rudiments of writing— 'Tsomo watches Father...He is mainly copying manuscripts...Tsomo finds her fingers involuntarily curling in the same formation.' She learns the prayers and chants as she hears her father and his students uttering them. But when she asks him to teach her, he sternly says,

'You are a girl. You are different. You learn other things that will make you a good woman and a good wife. Learn to cook, weave and all those things. A woman does not know how to read and write.'⁵

Her disappointment at being refused equal education because she is a girl, the contrast between the real work that her mother does, feeding their large family, and her father's learned preoccupation with prayers, chants, writing, reading, performing ritual prayers in their village, is most bitterly realized by Tsomo after her mother's gruesome death during pregnancy, unattended by modern medical care. Tsomo remembers her mother:

Her breasts...were sagging from being pulled and sucked to emptiness by too many eager mouths... The image of her mother sitting by the hearth, stirring a pot of something on the stove with her right hand and feeding a baby in her lap, rasping for breath, her belly swollen in pregnancy, is the image that fills Tsomo's mind even now.

Father believed that large numbers of people were a great blessing. He used to list the endowments, '*Drangpa mi yi long choi, nepa choygi long choi, sumpa junor long choi*'. ('First the abundance of people, second the abundance of religion, and third the abundance of material wealth.') The family was blessed in the first: the thirteenth child was on its way. Being a religious man, Father provided religion in abundance and the rest of the family struggled for the abundance of the third order: wealth.⁶

To Tsomo the bird that is a pen, represents a freedom that is for men only.⁷ However in the total structure of the novel, the pen, books, and book learning are shown to be inadequate and ineffective for survival, both material and spiritual. Tsomo's father despite his learning, and being venerated as a man of religion, turns out to be a weak, selfish and pathetic person. Tsomo's second husband who is skilled and trained in calligraphy is a scoundrel who charms people with his words. Neither learned like her father nor interested in earning by his skill for which there is great demand, Lhatu is a liar who lives off Tsomo's earnings. On the road-building site there is a tea-stall owner, who knows how to read and write. But the ledger where he keeps account of what the labourers owe him is stolen when his tea-stall is blown away by the impact of a dynamite blast. This man takes his loss philosophically and moves on. The other literate person at the site, the overseer cheats the unread labourers of their true wages by shaking the account book at them. In childhood Tsomo had seen lessons wasted on boys who were simply not interested, while she was barred despite her keenness. At the Rimpoche's house in Kalimpong Lhatu is assigned the task of copying manuscripts, and Tsomo who would have made an excellent calligrapher and learned person, had her father only taught her, is encouraged to distill *ara*. Lhatu does not do his job, it is only Tsomo's work as distiller of the popular brew that ensures a roof over their heads during this period. It is here in the house of monks that Tsomo senses, unseen eyes peeping at her, in a scene reminiscent of 'Susanna and the Elders'. The monks are shown to be interested in her female body and in the liquor. Yet religious education has ensured for them regular food and shelter in the *sangha*. It is the ordinary people, the unread and uneducated who are skilled in jobs that matter— farming, weaving, cooking, driving jeeps up and down the mountain roads, breaking stones to make the roads, perilously

walking alongside road-rollers, wiping away the tar from the wheels, breathing the steaming tar and stone dust, cleaning the toilets at the hospital — whose work and human feelings sustain the economic and social fabric. These persons are shown closely as human beings and as workers. Tsomo herself earns her living at various times by weaving, growing vegetables, distilling *ara*, the homemade Bhutanese liquor, acting as a caretaker of an empty house, and in her last days chanting prayers on behalf of patrons. Also notable is the fact that these poor people sustain one another by giving generously to one in need.

Tsomo finds herself rehabilitated again and again through the kindness of the friends she makes on the way. When her house is burgled they offer her food, utensils and groceries, when she is in need of money they give her money, or tell her where she can sell what she has, to raise the money. Tsomo is thus able to sell two old *kiras* or Bhutanese women's robes that had been used by generations of women in her family, to a gigantic foreigner with golden hair and blue eyes who is looking for old hand-woven fabric. The money helps her to pay for her pilgrimage to Nepal. On another occasion later in her life, she sells the stones that Wagchen had given her and which she had been wearing round her neck all these years. Buddhist *chortens* or stupas, the monasteries and the conferences also provide a source of food, clothing, shelter and network to persons like Tsomo.

Most women and men in Tsomo's village had never seen or met anyone from the outside world. A few young men leave to become monks, like Tsomo's elder brother; or become soldiers like her friend's suitor. Therefore when Tsomo leaves home, we get to see the world through her wonderstruck eyes. This de-familiarization of what is familiar (to the reader) therefore works as an important critical device in the novel, sensitizing the reader to the nuances of political, economic and cultural domination as it touches the lives of ordinary persons.

Within the village economy, Tsomo finds that families are socially graded in a peculiar way:

Tsomo learned very early in life that all villagers were related in one way or another. When they were on good terms everybody referred to, 'Our ancient tie of a common ancestor,' but when they were not on good

terms, one family was accused of being a lower social group than the other. Aunt Dechen was the expert when it came to expounding the genealogies of each family. She would pull her lower lip in a contemptuous pout and say, 'those people from Choden Lhamo's house behave like real serfs because they cannot shake off the serf traits.'...

Even as children they were keenly aware of the group they came from. Tsomo felt safe and comfortable being who she was, a daughter of tax-paying parents...The serfs were descendants of the plains people, who were brought as slaves and were considered to be of the lowest class. They lived in houses owned by their masters and they possessed no fields of their own. They had to be given food or rations. The tenant farmers who worked on tenured land were considered to be a little higher up the social ladder. Neither serfs nor tenant farmers paid taxes to the central government. They worked instead for a landed family who lived further up the valley.⁸

But these distinctions too were hazy, and challenged when there was a fight. Aum Chomo whose son is rejected as a serf by the girl's family who are tax-payers, shouts,

'Where did you come from? If you descended from the heavens of the gods above, show me the ladder you came down on and if you ascended from the underworld of subterranean beings, describe to me the stairs you climbed up. I thought we came together for work at the whistle of our supervisors and ate from the same pots from which our food was ladled out to us?'⁹

But in matters of gender no one dares to question. Only Tsomo seethes at the injustice to women. Religious power is vested in males in this Buddhist community that carries on with some pre-Buddhist practices. Thus while women do the work of preparing feasts for births, deaths, marriages, and food for the spirits to ward away illness, men like Tsomo's father are called upon to perform prayers and purifications. Households are matrilineal or patrilineal. Once out of the village however the reader is made aware through the persons and situations Tsomo encounters, the larger patterns of domination

at work. Thus on her first journey outside the village, undertaken to light butter lamps for her mother's spirit, and bring peace to the household Tsomo meets a nun, an elderly woman. The older man accompanying her explains,

'Ani, here is my sister. She has just come from Tibet. Now that the communist Chinese have come into Tibet she has decided to come home. It was really a wise decision for the communists don't like religion or religious people. She would have been killed or imprisoned for sure. She is going to Kalimpong because some of the Tibetan masters are there.'...Tsomo had heard about the communists but Ani was the first person she met who had actually encountered them and her curiosity was aroused. ..'Did you actually see the communists? What do they look like? Visions of demonic creatures were already floating in her head.

'They don't look any different from us. They are people just like us. The only difference is they are completely against religion. '

Immediately the image of long fangs and hook-like nails disappeared from Tsomo's mind and, a little disappointed, she repeated, 'People just like us'? ¹⁰

The fact that Tsomo makes this discovery soon after her own bitter experience of what religion has done to her mother and father, introduces a critical subtext about Buddhism's medievalism as practiced in the Himalayan region. Later Tsomo meets many Tibetans and finds friendship, help and hospitality from these people who have fled their own homeland and are constantly traveling across India and Nepal. She finally finds comfort and economic sustenance from an exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, the Rinpoche.

Before she makes Tibetan friends Tsomo works as a stonebreaker on the Thimpu-Pheuntsoling road project.¹¹

Day after day Tsomo sat with the women breaking stones into gravel and piling them into heaps... Their eyes watered with the dust and the wind. Their hands were rough and cracked and often bled...Yet these women lived. They chatted, laughed sang and dared to dream of better things to come...Tsomo fitted right in.¹²

These women, many of them from Nepal, like sixteen-year old Kumari, old Naina Devi, twenty five year old Shanti, forty-year old Lata Didi become her new friends. Some of them call her Tsomo Didi. There are Bhutanese women too on this site. Later Tsomo makes friends with some Ladakhis too. And although the persons Tsomo meets, are from various ethnic groups — Bhutanese, Nepalese, Tibetan or Indian — they bond through their mutual need, even when they cannot understand each other's language, as in the case of the sweeper's wife, Sita Didi who brings Tsomo home from the hospital after her operation and helps her through the initial days. Sometimes ethnic roots also help, as when Tsomo and her young friend Dechen Choki find themselves set down from the bus at nightfall in a semi-deserted stretch in Pheuntsoling. The woman of the house they knock at turns out to be from Dechen Choki's area and when Dechen speaks out in the same dialect, the woman opens her home to them. Later her husband, a policeman puts them on the bus to Kalimpong. The delineation of spontaneous friendship and camaraderie between Tsomo and the women she meets on the way, the total absence of national, linguistic or religious barriers reveals how, the poor and the migrant, the unorganized workforce live in borderless territory bonding with each other as they have nothing to lose.

The young woman Dechen Choki had become Tsomo's hut-mate, sharing the hut and sharing food. Tsomo's rough looks and her swollen belly make her look older than she is. This keeps her out of trouble at this site. As a single woman living alone in a hut by the roadside Tsomo felt,

...her bulging belly ...was a benediction. Although she was a single unattached woman, she could sleep undisturbed every night, no prowlers came banging at her door although she was always afraid they might. Desperate men, she thought went to any woman, even one with a distorted body. The people in her village said nothing when the deaf and dumb mute who could not even dress herself became pregnant. Some people even made harsh jokes. Tsomo assumed a very severe image; she never joked, teased and smiled at any man. All men whom she considered older than her, she addressed as uncle and big brother and all men whom she considered younger were little brother. These were

the defenses she adopted as she shrank into a cocoon of cold isolation. She had run away because she did not want to define her relationship to anybody and now she realized that it was absolutely vital to determine the boundaries of her existence through relationships like, 'big brother', 'little brother', 'uncle.'¹³

The young arrogant well-dressed overseer who is, like Tsomo, a Bhutanese addresses her as 'Elder sister.' But he repeatedly rapes Dechen even after being caught by Tsomo in the act. Tsomo cannot protect this girl. One day the overseer's wife comes and catches her husband. But instead of her husband, she attacks the young girl in public, tearing off her clothes and snatching away her *kira* pins. No one but Tsomo protests as the overseer is their employer. But after this she and Dechen run away to Pheuntsoling and from there to Siliguri in the plains.

Tsomo meets her elder brother here and they spend a few happy weeks together meeting other pilgrims who had congregated to meet a high lama. But her brother soon goes away leaving his hut for Tsomo and Dechen. Here they set up house again. This time Dechen weaves and Tsomo prepares the yarn and grows vegetables. All goes well for Tsomo until a fine young man falls in love with Dechen and she gets married and moves out. Even after her marriage Dechen continues to visit the hut and weave at the loom, bringing Tsomo food and rations. This is a recurring pattern in Tsomo's life. Women come into her life and help her again and again.

Before leaving for his retreat, her brother shares a rare moment of emotion with her. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he says,

'I think we can never be free of our attachments through our bodies...The more I tried not to think of the family, the more lucid your images became. But my master said I will be able to overcome this attachment too.'¹⁴

This celibate young man listens to his sister's sad story and tells her,

Our lives are like that lamp on the altar. We are born and we live for a while like the lamp...Life is transient. We are just passing by. Think of yourself as a pilgrim on earth and in your own body because that too you

must surrender. But take heart in this, a pilgrim has a definite purpose even if it is for the duration of a pilgrimage. A pilgrim wants to accumulate merit and pray for all sentient beings. We can all chose to be pilgrims.¹⁶

When Tsomo had left her home in shame, sorrow and bitterness, she had come down from her mountain village and travelled to Thimpu looking for her elder brother who had left home to become a monk. 'He was supposed to be in Thimpu otherwise even in her blinding fury she would not have come here. She would have gone east or north.' But after this chance meeting with him at Siliguri and his departing words, she continues her journey with a new attitude. Destiny however intervenes and just when she is beginning to live alone once again, her second 'husband' walks into her hut. Thus begins a marriage where her own need for warmth, companionship and love makes her serve this idle, lying and gambling man for years. By the time he leaves her she is an old woman. And it is as a spent old woman that, in a moment of mad fury, she takes a penknife and goes to his new and young wife intending to cut off her nose. She hazily remembers how the wives in her village had done terrible things to a young woman called Pem Doma accusing her of stealing their husbands. 'She was completely dehumanized by the time she died at the age of twenty-four.' Tsomo is saved from attacking the girl by the chance intervention of an old associate of her husband who had befriended her in Delhi.

After this episode Tsomo returns to her Kalimpong home and finds it robbed of the few things she had. Two schoolboys now lead her to the foreign missionaries who dole out cooking oil and a strange grain. Unable to eat it Tsomo begins to distill *ara* with this grain and takes some to the Rimpoche from whose presence she derives immense solace. Like wine among Christian Catholics, *ara* is used by the Tibetan Buddhists as a religious offering. He now makes her a nun saying that she is at last ready. Now Tsomo shaves her head, and wears the coarse garb of nuns. She begins to spend her days at the *chorten*, 'circumambulating' it while chanting prayers on her beads. The government pays her and other elderly monks and nuns a regular stipend that she receives at the bank. She lives in a hut by the roadside on municipal land from which she may be evicted any day. She visits her friend Lham Yeshi often, slurping biscuits soaked in tea. One day she leaves for the Great Prayer festival in Bodhgaya. Weeks pass. Others return to the *chorten* but Lham Yeshi does not

find her. Until one day Lham Yeshe sees her simultaneously everywhere in the *chorten*.

What distinguishes Tsomo's journey from that of other homeless women is the pilgrim's quest. 'Collecting merit' as it is called. Although it is her husband's brutality that drives her out of home, it may be recalled that since early childhood Tsomo had shown an affinity for religion and learning. As a young girl she had set out alone for Trongsa traveling down unfamiliar paths. The riddle of the bird-pen becomes a metaphor inscribing her life. Unlettered herself she becomes the bird itself as she wanders alone and independent—

She decided to be a bird, not a flightless one. She was going to fly away, to run away. Somewhere nobody would know her, where she would not have to define her relationship to anybody.¹⁶

Tsomo is able to become a really 'flying bird' only when, unlike the pen/bird, she is not held in a man's fingers. In her old age, just before she leaves for her final journey her friend Lham Yeshe has a vision of Tsomo:

When Tsomo talks of her life Lham Yeshe thinks of a river flowing its course. She talks smoothly most of the time, some memories bring forth laughter like a gurgling brook, some times she roars passionately like a tumultuous river in spate, and like a river, she draws everybody in her path. She seems compelled by some instinct to tell her life, to relieve her past so that her present can become coherent.¹⁷

The longing for learning that had made Tsomo listen to the lessons her Father gave the boys, now turns into a need to visit holy places and holy persons. It is as though what she cannot receive directly from books she will gather from her travels. As she tells her friend Lham Yeshe before her final journey,

I have no money and no property to worry about... I will carry what I can. Probably a change of clothes and a warm blanket. I have neither the strength nor the need for many things. I will live by the goodwill of the people. I may go hungry once in a while but I will not starve. I will walk when I have to but I will get rides when I am lucky. I

am not in a hurry, I'll travel at my own pace. Aja in the east is the place I want to visit most so I'll go there first. That is my plan for my life...¹⁸

The Circle of Karma is a detailed evocation of the lives of Tibetan and Bhutanese migrants in the plains of India. Although not all of them are poor — the novel mentions rich patrons of the Rimpoche who provide feasts at the Buddhist conferences, or get easy access to his earthly remains after he passes away, while poor Tsomo is refused entry by the guard, and Tsomo does have some women friends who are comparatively well-off— the novel details the lives of simple ordinary, mostly poor folk in a very intimate way. Tsomo's father had listed 'wealth' as the last item in the list of things humans must create. The Buddha's life and teachings demonstrate that wealth is to be cast off. But Buddhism was founded by a King's son and in its heyday enjoyed the patronage of the rich enabling it to consolidate itself through monasteries, shrines and writings. In this novel we find modern day Buddhism surviving in strangely mutated and beleaguered ways. The Buddhist spiritual head is in exile. The learned Lamas are fleeing Tibet, as are ordinary folk. In the land of its origin, in Bodhgaya in Bihar it is as good as a historical monument, a pilgrim spot.

In Tsomo's village in Bhutan it is practiced in its ritualistic form, along with other 'pre-Buddhist rites and customs'¹⁹. When Tsomo's Mother lies dying during her thirteenth pregnancy her father who is a Buddhist priest tries prayers and chants. Then,

As a last resort, Mother's own brother was called into the delivery room and asked to step over his sister in an act of defiling the taboo between brothers and sisters. This act was supposed to help hasten the delivery but nothing happened. By the end of three days her eyes began to sink into their sockets and her teeth were locked together.²⁰

After her Mother dies there is another horrifying ritual to be performed. Mother's brother tells them that the child inside her dead body must be taken out and made to occupy the space, feel the wind and the sky as it had collected enough merit in its previous birth to be born as a human in this one. He decrees that someone who loved Mother best must perform this deed. 'They all loved Mother, but it was decided that Father loved her best.' Some one suggests

that if he was afraid someone else could do the deed. 'Father was not afraid and he loved Mother best.' This ambiguous sentence seems to be an authorial comment rather than Tsomo's observation. When her Father breaks down weeping, Tsomo is 'sad and angry.'

The sadness and anger ate through her heart like a worm in a fruit, slowly but surely. Father was moaning and trembling because he was sad like all of them. He was groaning and trembling because he had to take part in something he had so far considered a woman's duty, gestation and birthing. Circumstances were reversed and he was being forced to play a part in this unnatural situation.²¹

This is a telling comment on the fact that rural women traditionally single-handedly perform difficult surgeries, deliveries, abortions, and nurse the sick— a task performed now in hospitals by an entire medical team— on top of their regular house-work and fieldwork. The horror of Mother's death in this religious-taboo ridden environment is highlighted later when Tsomo's operation is performed in a modern hospital under anaesthesia. It is part of the strength of the book that the author keeps the modern scientific tone out of her narrative. Thus Tsomo's consultation with the foreign doctor is presented only in terms of Tsomo's incomprehension of his words. Not once does the narrative state the obvious — that Tsomo had been carrying a huge tumour in her belly for years.

The ritual of marriage too is a local practice rather than a Buddhist one. The author tells us that only very rich people have weddings. For most others it is a 'purification ceremony' where the pregnant girl sits among community members and the father of the child comes forward to be recognized. When a father does not turn up, the girl is married to a clay doll and the child is thus socially accepted. Women take an active part in these rituals. In some ways therefore, it would seem that Bhutanese society as shown in Tsomo's village did not put the kind of rigid emphasis on 'purity' that prevailed among upper caste Hindus in India during the same period and that still prevails as a notion in the popular imagination in the plains.²² Nevertheless the notion of women being unclean, or unfit to join the *sangha* is something that Buddhism shares with not only pre-Buddhist *Samkhya* philosophy²³ but also ancient Greek and early Christian religious beliefs.²⁴ Women entered the Buddhist *sangha* after

arduous struggle by Mahapajapati Gautami, the Buddha's royal foster mother, and upon conditions that were many times more rigid than those demanded from male monks.²⁵ However, implicit in the notion of woman as corporeal being who must be shunned, is a devaluation of youth, beauty and sexuality. This consequently creates a space for the aged, unbeautiful, de-sexualized woman. Buddhist stories such as that of Chandaliika, the outcaste woman who was given her due respect by a Buddhist Bhikshu, or the story of the celebrated courtesan who found the Buddha indifferent to her charms, but who received his soothing touch when her body had become putrid with disease and she had been removed outside the city gates, or even the Hindu myth of the deformed Kubja being blessed by Lord Rama's touch are echoed in Tsomo's relationship to the Rimpoche, and also in her brief but comforting encounter with the bearded foreign missionaries. The entire novel, as a literary production, it would seem, is enabled by this philosophy. After all one doesn't come across novels about weather-beaten, sexually unattractive, deformed by disease, heroines, nor novels about woman mendicants, that see through her eyes this panoramic sweep of places, people, races, or this intimate detail of the lives and work of the poor.

Another thought comes to mind. This age has been, among other things, the age of a famous nun, who too travelled a long way from her home and gave succour to thousands. Why is it that Tsomo, unlike Mother Teresa, is barely able to survive? The answer to this is there in the novel itself. The Buddhist mission is besieged. Its head is a refugee from his own land. The Christian missionaries bring 'charity' — foodgrains and cooking oil — that is received by the Buddhist poor like Tsomo. The Rimpoche as he savours the *ara* distilled from the foreign grain tells Tsomo, 'I want you to tell these kind priests in Kalimpong that their charity has reached a Tibetan refugee priest...A gift from one priest to another.'²⁶

The Circle of Karma is distinctive as a work of English fiction, even though points of similarity with other works by women may occur to the reader — Pearl S Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931) coincidentally set in pre-communist China delineating the life of a peasant family; Ashapura Debi's famous Bengali novel *Pratham Pratishruti* or First Promise, (1964) about women's lives inside the middleclass family; Kamala Markandya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954)

exploring the life of an Indian rural family; Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife, Jasmine, or The Middleman and Other Stories* (during the 1980s) , that are more about cultural crossings by women, though unlike Kunzang Choden's novel, about young and often attractive women.

In *The Circle of Karma*, the author's treatment of the female body and a woman's life, through puberty, childbirth, illness, old age and death posits a very human as opposed to 'male' perspective. If, as has been suggested a little earlier, this could be seen as an enabling fallout of the misogynist aspect of Buddhist asceticism, it ought also to be read in the light of the modernism that Kunzang Choden's education exposed her to. Schooling at the Loreto convent in Darjeeling, and later at Indraprastha College (IP) in Delhi, she would, until her twenties have grown up in exclusively women's institutions. It is easy to be unselfconscious of one's body as a site of sexuality in such segregated environments. Secondly, the fact that, while at Indraprastha College, Kunzang won the annual beauty contest, and featured that year on the cover of the glamorous women's magazine *Femina*, has been carefully kept out of the customary 'author's details' on the first page of the book, even though another publisher might have used this fact to boost sales. There are several reasons for this besides the one that *The Circle of Karma* is not that kind of book and the associate publisher Zubaan²⁷ would have its own resistance to beauty contests. One reason is that around the time of the contest of 1973 that Kunzang Choden had won, a feminist awareness had begun to take form and coalesce in this college. Some teachers of the college, feminist scholars like Sudesh Vaid returned to Indraprastha after studies abroad; Vaid from Kent State University, Ohio, the seat of radicalism, anti-Vietnam protests and State repression in the sixties. At IP, in classrooms, seminars, research papers, a movement was taking shape that soon spilled over outside the campus.²⁸ Madhu Kishwar, who later founded India's first feminist journal *Manushi* came down to IP In 1977 and pointed out to wide-eyed women undergraduates, the link between beauty contests, sexual harassment of women in streets and buses in Delhi, the consumer industry, and the contest's blatant class-discrimination that privileged English speech and pampered skin in a supposedly egalitarian institution as college. In 1977, the students of Indraprastha organized protests and debates and the contest, which had hitherto had the blessings of the faculty, was scrapped. Kunzang Choden, by this time had moved to the United States to

study sociology. And America of the seventies was the birthplace of many of the theories and initiatives of the modern feminist movement, and the establishment of feminism in academia.

The novel therefore is informed both by the liberating ethos of Buddhism and by modern feminism in its foregrounding of a woman traveller nun, who unlike the male monks does not try to struggle against her sexuality but attains liberation (*moksha*) and enlightenment (*nirvana*) simply by being true to herself. Tsomo's journey sees her go through almost every female experience. It is worth noting however that the Rimpoche makes her a nun only when she is aged and her second husband has left her.

As this is a review article, a few points about the production of the book. The editing leaves room for improvement.²⁹ Sometimes information about Bhutanese conditions intrudes upon the natural rhythm of the narrative; one wonders if such information could have gone into an appendix. The chapter headings could have been itemized at the beginning.

Notes

* 'The earliest known anthology of women's literature — in India certainly but possibly anywhere in the world — took shape when the songs composed by the Buddhist *theris* or senior nuns, which date back to the sixth century B.C., were collected into the *Therigatha*. The poets were evidently contemporaries of the Buddha, though the 522 stanzas of the collection were committed to writing only around 80. B.C. Each lyric in this collection as well in the companion volume of songs composed by the monks is a testimony, for it bears witness to a life transformed by the Buddha's teachings, and celebrates a release, sometimes from the toil and hardship of everyday life, but more often from a "hidden shaft" lodged in the heart or from a consuming anxiety...The songs provide us with rare glimpses into the personal lives of a wide range of women who joined the ascetic communities. Among them were poor peasants, small artisans, wealthy wives and daughters of businessmen, noblewomen, and courtesans. Many poems describe what we would today think of as oppressions of class and gender. Others provide a critique of a religion that has no space for the pain or the longing of individuals.

Everyone, regardless of status, caste, or gender, the Buddha preached, was united in Buddhism, "as are the rivers in the sea." The three jewels commonly referred to in the poems are the three authorities of Buddhism: the Buddha himself, the *Dhamma* or the rules of Buddhist life; and the *Sangha*, or the ascetic community.'
 ——— Susie Tharu, and K. Lalita, 'Therigatha: Songs of Nuns, 6th Century B.C. (Pali)', in *Women Writing in India: 600B.C. to the Present*, Volume I. '600B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century'. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991, pp.65-66.

1. Kunzang Choden, *The Circle of Karma*, Penguin Books India in association with Zubaan Books, New Delhi, 2005.

2. I use the term 'Female' here partly in Showalter's sense of the word where Female denotes a progression of being, writing, or perspective from the 'Feminine' which is constructed by patriarchy and the male gaze, to the 'Feminist' which is a reaction to that construct and asserts women's rights, resistances through somewhat isolationist and retaliatory strategies, to the final 'Female' stage which moves beyond gender towards a vision that resolves the conflict between the two phases. See, Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.

In this sense 'Female' would denote a type of consciousness that is more aligned to Woolf's concept of the androgynous mind as developed in *A Room of One's Own*, and as clarified by Toril Moi's 'Rescuing Woolf for feminist politics: some points towards an alternative reading' in *Sexual / Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Methuen, London 1985, pp8-18.

3. 'At the age of nine, Kunzang Choden trudged 12 days on foot and on horseback through dense jungles and splendid mountains in the daytime and slept inside narrow caves at night. She was on her way to school.

It was the Fifties. Bhutan, almost an isolated Himalayan kingdom till then, had hesitantly opened its doors to modern education. Till then, mostly boys received religious education in the Buddhist monasteries. But now, as government schools opened up, education became accessible to all. Girls too could attend these schools.

But Kunzang's father had a more radical idea. A prosperous farmer in central Bhutan's Bumthang district, he decided to send his daughter to a convent in eastern India. The villagers thought he was crazy. For a society where education was almost synonymous with men and religion, the idea of sending a daughter to school abroad was unheard of, almost sacrilegious. But Kunzang's father knew what he was doing.

So one fine day, they set her off on an arduous trek to St Joseph's School, Kalimpong. Kunzang even had a retinue of servants, and, hold it (!), a translator, for company. Cooking their own food, dancing around campfires and listening to the sound of the wind, it was like a happy Long March towards the unknown. "I didn't even know where I was going. I only knew India as the land Buddha came from..." After finishing school from Darjeeling — she had moved to Loreto Convent by then — Kunzang went to Indraprastha College (IP), Delhi. "Folk tales, oral traditions and women's issues — these are my key areas of interest," says Kunzang, who also has a degree in sociology from the University of Nebraska. Studying sociology has helped her understand how women were made to carry out a sustenance role through much of Bhutanese history'. Avijit Ghosh, *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, India, Sunday, April 3, 2005.

4. *The Circle of Karma*, p.19

5. *Ibid.* p.21

6. *Ibid.* p.56

7. 'But though Buddhism accepts that both men and women might attain *nirvana* and though both monks and nuns were provided the same rigorous meditative training and philosophical education, and entrusted with preaching the doctrine, the general tone of Buddhism, the feminist historian Uma Chakravarti points out, was antagonistic to women. Detailed accounts of the exchanges that took place before women were finally allowed to join the community of the houseless in the *Sangha* have survived, and are worth recounting for the insight they give us into patriarchal ideologies and women's status in the early Buddhist period'. *Op cit.* Tharu and Lalita, p.66. The authors cite in their bibliography, *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* by Uma Chakravarti, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987.

8. *The Circle of Karma*, p.4
9. Ibid.p5
10. Ibid.pp.74-75
11. 'When the Chinese communists took over Tibet in 1951, Bhutan closed its frontier with Tibet and sided with its powerful neighbor to the south. To offset the chance of Chinese encroachment, Bhutan began a modernization program. Land reform was accompanied by the abolition of slavery and serfdom and the separation of the judiciary from the executive branch of government. Mostly funded by India after China's invasion of Tibet in 1959, the modernization program also included the construction of roads linking the Indian plains with central Bhutan. An all-weather road was completed in 1962 between Thimphu and Phuntsholing, the overland gateway town on the southwest border with India.'— Library of Congress Country Studies, (online) *Bhutan: Modernization under Jigme Dorji, 1952-72*, Section 1 of 1, Data as of September 1991
12. *The Circle of Karma*. p.101-103
13. Ibid.p.106
14. Ibid.p.144
15. Ibid.p.145
16. Ibid. p.94
17. Ibid. 'Prologue'p.viii
18. Ibid. p.314
19. 'Buddhism replaced but did not eliminate the Bon religious practices that had also been prevalent in Tibet until the late sixth century. Instead, Buddhism absorbed Bon and its believers. As the country developed in its many fertile valleys, Buddhism matured and became a unifying element. It was Buddhist literature and chronicles that began the recorded history of Bhutan.' Library of Congress Country Studies, (online) *Bhutan*, Data as of September, 1991.
20. *The Circle of Karma* .pp.58-59
21. Ibid. p.60-61
22. The following news item, headlined, 'Overseas Lankan Tamils

shun TN(Tamil Nadu) stars' and reported by PK Balachandran from Colombo, November 15, 2005, gives an idea of the taboo – 'Tamils living in Europe and North America have decided not to distribute or see films featuring Khushboo and Suhasini Manirathnam on the grounds that they had insulted Tamil women. They have also warned that they will agitate against the screening of films made by director Manirathnam...This is the latest development in the raging controversy over Khushboo's statement that there was a high prevalence of pre-marital sex among women in Tamil Nadu...The ban and the warning were announced by the "European and North American Film Fans Association" and the latter's statement was reported at length in the pro-LTTE website www.puthinam.com on Monday. The Overseas Tamils' statement warned Tamil Nadu film makers and stars not to take them lightly because the overseas market was a substantial source of income for the Chennai film industry.' Source *Hindustan Times .com* , Thursday, November 17,2005.

23. '...Vedic sects practiced asceticism to attain a more sustaining pleasure of heaven while the non-Vedic ascetics toiled for freedom from pleasures of this world and the heavens. The latter pursued an ultimate emancipation from the cycle of birth and death. Philosophical ideas regarding karma, rebirth and freedom from rebirth through asceticism were present for a long period and gradually got assimilated into the early Upanishads...in *Buddhacharita*, the biography of Lord Buddha, written by the Brahmin convert Asvaghosa (second century A.D.) in the episode of the young renunciate Siddhartha meeting with the Samkhyan teacher, Arada Kalama, the aim of Samkhya philosophy is represented as advocating renunciation by turning away the mind of the disciples from samsara or the world...Even though according to the *Samkhyakarika*, theoretically speaking, every human being , male or female, and in fact all living beings possess consciousness or purusha, and every corporeal body encasing the purusha is constituted of prakrti's evolutes, it is the human woman who is totally identified with prakrti...the focus seems to be just on her corporeality. Fated thus, the woman is not only seen as unfit for higher pursuits, but worse she is seen to impede the spiritual progress of men. Hence renunciation of women, which became equivalent to renunciation of samsara or prakrti was strongly enjoined for those who chose the ascetic path. The parallel options of giving up contact with men and

retiring from samsara were not available to woman.'— 'Gendering of Early Indian Philosophy: A Study of *Samkhyakarika*' by Kanchana Natarajan in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 28,2001.pp 1399 and .1403.

24. '...gender became the dominant metaphor by which Aristotle defended and justified the system of slavery. At the time of Aristotle's writing of *Politics* the question of the moral rightness of slavery was still problematical...Aristotle reasoned that some men are born to rule, others to be ruled. He illustrated this principle by drawing an analogy between soul and body—the soul is superior to the body and therefore must rule it. Similarly rational mind is superior to passion and so must rule it. And "The male is by nature superior and the female inferior; the one rules and the other is ruled and this principle, of necessity extends to all mankind,"[Aristotle, *Politica*,(tr. Benjamin Jowett), in W.D.Ross, ed., *The Works of Aristotle*, Oxford, Clarendon Press,1,2,1254b,24-26;1255a,2-5]— Gerda Lerner , 'Men's Power to Define and the Creation of Women's Consciousness', excerpted from *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen Seventy*, Oxford University Press 1993, in Sheila Ruth , ed., *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, Mayfield Publishing Company, California, 1995.p408

St. Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274) ...was known for his reconciliation of Christian doctrine with the philosophy of Aristotle ...(whose) analysis of woman as "misbegotten male" is one of a whole genre of theories, popular through the centuries, treating womanhood as a partial or defective instance of manhood. See Sheila Ruth, *Ibid.* p.99

25. See, Tharu and Lalita, pp.66-67

26. *The Circle of Karma*.p.284

27. Zubaan means tongue, the organ of speech, as well as tongue in the sense of language, as in 'mother tongue'. Zubaan Books was founded after the division of India's first feminist press, Kali for Women.

28. See, for instance, the role of the Indraprastha College Committee in the first mass public outcry against dowry death around this period, in *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*, Radha Kumar, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2001.p119. See also,

'Sudesh Vaid: Feminist and Democrat' by Jasodhara Bagchi. In this obituary Bagchi writes, 'Co-editor of *Recasting Women*, a pioneering contribution to Women's Studies in India, Sudesh Vaid...a relentless fighter in the cause of democratic rights and social justice, Sudesh taught English Literature in IP College, Delhi, and inspired the love and admiration of many generations of students...' *Newsletter*, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, Volume 12, 8th March 2002, p39.

29. Professor Jharna Sanyal, in a conversation with this reviewer, drew attention to this aspect of the book.

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